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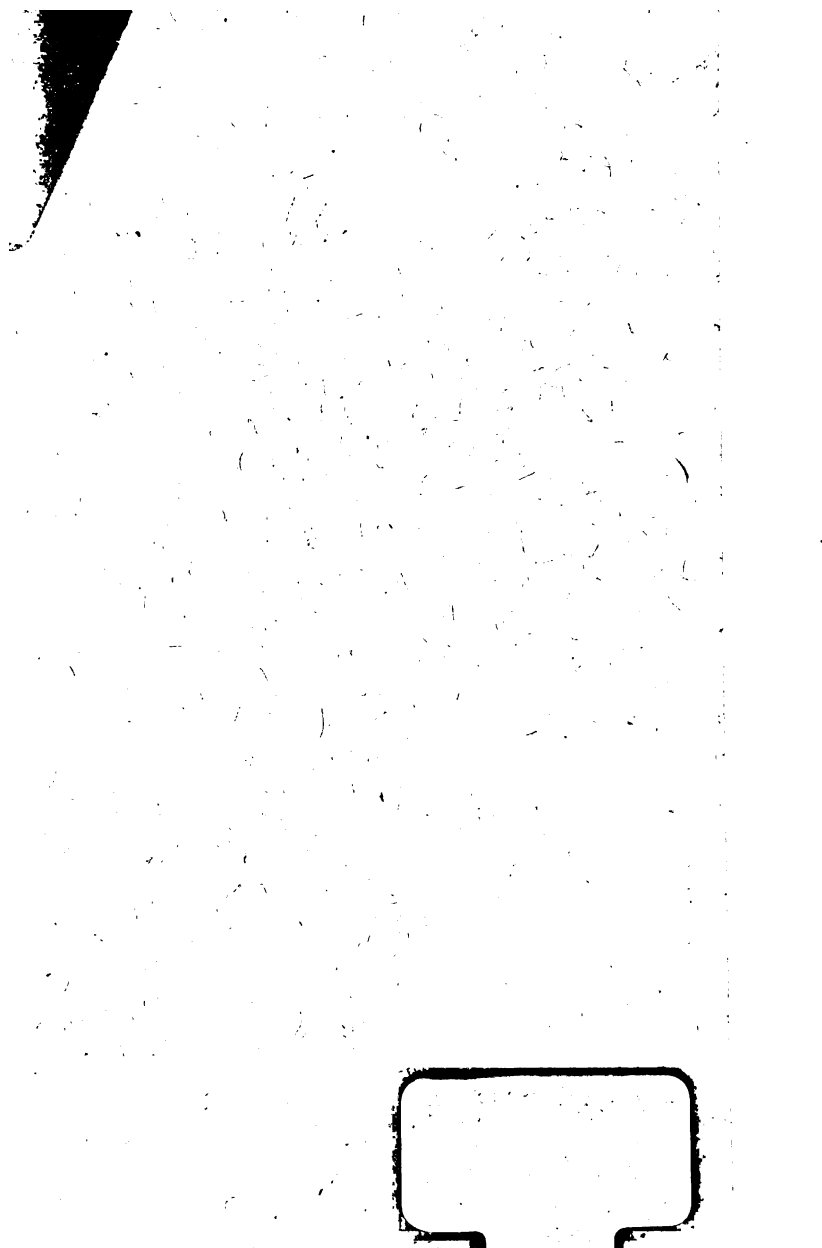
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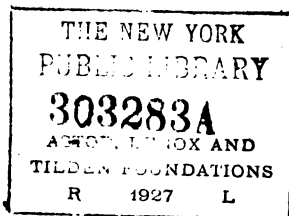


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THE TOWER OF PERCEMONT.

I.

It was in the autumn of 1873 that I first became connected with the De Nives family. It was during my vacation. I possessed at that time an annual income of about thirty thousand francs, acquired as much by my professional labor as a barrister in the royal court as by the assiduous and patient improvement of the real estate of Madame Chantabel, my wife. My only son, Henri, had just finished his law-studies at Paris, and I was expecting him the very evening when I received by express the following note:

"To M. Chantabel, barrister, at the Maison-Blanche, commune of Percemont, Riom.

"SIR: May I ask for your legal advice? I know that it is your vacation, but I will come to your country-house to-morrow, if you are willing to receive me.

"ALIX, COUNTESS DE NIVES.

"R. S. V. P."

I replied that I should expect the countess on the next day, and immediately my wife began to find fault with me.

"You always reply at once in the same fashion," she said, "and never let any one urge you or wait for you, just as a briefless barrister would do! You will never know how to make the most of your rank!"

"My rank? What is my rank, please tell me?"

"You have the highest legal rank in the country. Your fortune is made, and it is high time for you to take a little rest."

"That will soon come, I hope; but until our son has commenced the practice of his profession, and shown that he is able to take my place, I do not intend to endanger the situation. I wish to install him with every chance of success."

"You always talk in this way; you have a mania for business, and are never willing to lose a case. You will die in the harness. Let us see! Suppose Henri has not the ability to take your place?"

"Then, as I promised, I will retire and end my days in the country; but Henri *will* take my place. He is a good scholar; he is well endowed—"

"But he has not your physical strength and your determined will. He is a delicate child. He takes after me."

"We shall see! If the work is too much for him, I shall make him a consulting barrister, under my direction. I am sufficiently well known and appreciated to be sure that practice will not be wanting."

"Well and good, I should like that better. A consulting lawyer can give his opinion without leaving his home, and while living on his estate."

"Yes, at my age, with my reputation and experience; but this will not do for a young man. He must live in the city, and even go to see his clients. It will be advisable that, during the first years of professional duty, I should be near at hand in order to direct him."

"That is just like you! you do not wish to retire! Then of what use is it to purchase a château and go to the expense of making it habitable, if neither of you will live there?"

"My wife had induced me to purchase the manor of Percemont, situated in the very middle of our estate, in the commune of the same name. This territory, within the inclosure of our land, had been a source of trouble to us for a long time, and we desired very much to become its owners; but the old Baron Coras de Percemont valued his ancestral manor at an exorbitant price, and determined to make the purchaser pay dear for the honor of restoring its ruins. We had given up the idea of possessing it, when the baron died without

children, and the château, having been put up at auction, was bid off by us for a reasonable sum. At least thirty thousand francs were required to render barely habitable this nest of vultures, perched on the summit of a volcanic cone, and I was by no means so eager as my wife to incur such an expense. Our country-house, spacious, neat, convenient, sheltered by hills, and surrounded by an extensive garden, appeared to me altogether sufficient, and our acquisition had no other merit in my eyes than that of freeing us from an inconvenient and mischief-making neighborhood. The declivities of the rocks that bore the Tower of Perceмонт were available for the culture of the grape. The summit, covered with a growth of young fir-trees, would hereafter become a good cover for game, and I intended, if it were left undisturbed, to have there, in time to come, an enjoyable reserve for hunting. My wife did not take this view of the case. This great tower had disordered her brain. It seemed to her that, in perching herself there, she raised her social level five hundred feet above the level of the sea. Women have their whims; mothers have their weaknesses. Henri had always manifested so strong a desire to possess Perceмонт that Madame Chantabel gave me no respite until I had bought it.

It was almost the first word she said to Henri, while embracing him, upon his arrival, for I had only

been two days in full possession of my new property.

"Thank your dear father!" she cried; "behold yourself lord of Percemont."

"Yes," I said, "baron of thistles and lord of screech-owls. That is something to be proud of. I think you must have some *cartes de visite* engraved which will acquaint the people around us with these lofty titles."

"My titles are more lofty than those," he replied. "I am the son of the most able and most honest man in the province. My name is Chantabel, and I consider myself as greatly ennobled by my father's deeds; I disdain all other lordship; but the romantic manor, the steep peak, the wild wood, are charming playthings for which I thank you, dear father, and, if you are willing, I shall find there in some pepper-box a little nest where from time to time I can read or dream."

"If that is the height of your ambition, I approve," I said, "and I give you the plaything. You will allow the game to come back which the old baron shot without cessation—having, I think, nothing else to put in his pantry—and next year we will hunt hares together. With this understanding, we will go to dinner, after which we will talk of more serious affairs."

I had indeed serious projects for my son, and we

did not discuss them for the first time. I wished him to marry his cousin, Emilie Ormonde, who was familiarly called Miliette, or, still better, Miette.

My late sister had married a rich countryman of the vicinity, the owner of a large farm, who had left at least a hundred thousand crowns to each of his children, Miette and Jacques Ormonde. Jacques was thirty years old, Emilie was twenty-two.

When I had refreshed Henri's memory in regard to this plan, concerning which he did not appear over-anxious to converse, I watched him still more attentively, as I had attacked him brusquely in order to surprise his first impression. It was more sad than gay, and he looked toward his mother as if to seek in her eyes the answer he must make. My wife had always approved and desired this marriage; I was, then, extremely surprised when, speaking instead of her son, she said, in a reproachful tone :

"Indeed, M. Chantabel, when you have set your mind on anything, it is like an iron wedge in a piece of rock. Can you not leave a single moment of joy and liberty to this poor child, who is worn out with exhausting labor, and who needs to breathe freely? Is it necessary to talk to him so soon about putting the marriage-cord around his neck?"

"Is it, then, a cord to hang one's self with?" I replied, a little angry; "do you find it so uncomfortable,

and do you wish to make him think that his parents do not live happily together?"

"I know it is not so," Henri replied, quickly. "I know that we three make only one. If you both wish me to marry immediately, I stand for nothing, and wish to stand for nothing; but—"

"But, if I am entirely alone in my opinion," I resumed, "it is I who will count for nothing. Then, we do not make one in three, and matters will be decided between us by the majority of votes."

"Do you know, M. Chantabel," said my wife, who was not wanting in spirit on the occasion, "we are happy in marriage in our fashion, but every one understands it in his own way, and since the good to look for, or the evil to risk, must be personal to our son, my opinion is, that neither of us should give him advice, but leave him to decide the question entirely alone."

"This is exactly the conclusion that I held in reserve," I replied; "but I thought that he was in love with Miette, and had decided a long time ago to marry her as soon as possible."

"And Miette?" said Henri, earnestly—"is she as decided as I am, and do you think that she is in love with me?"

"In love is a term which is not found in Miette's vocabulary. You know her: a young woman, calm, pure, decided, and sincere; the personification of in-

tegrity, goodness, and courage. It is certain that Miette has a great friendship for you. She has, besides me, only one guide and friend in this world, her brother Jacques, whom she blindly loves and respects. Miette Ormonde will marry whomsoever Jacques Ormonde chooses, and, since his childhood, Jacques Ormonde, who is your best friend, has destined his sister for you. What do you wish for better than this?"

"I could never desire nor hope for anything better if I were loved," replied Henri; "but let me tell you, my father, that this affection on which I thought I could rely has for some time grown strangely cold. Jacques did not reply when I announced my approaching return, and Emilie's last letters displayed a noticeable reserve."

"Did you not set her the example?"

"Has she complained?"

"Miette never complains of anything; she only remarked a kind of preoccupation in your letters, and, when I wished her to rejoice with me at the prospect of your return, she appeared to doubt if it were as near as I announced. Come, my son, tell us the truth. You may safely make confession to your parents. I do not ask you to give an account of diversions for which Miette could reproach you. We have all passed through those, we students of former times, and I do not pretend that we were better than you; but we re-

turned joyfully to the sheepfold, and perhaps in your correspondence with your cousin you have suffered a regret to escape for those diversions that you would do wrong to take too seriously."

"I hope not, my dear sir, for this regret was very light, and quickly effaced by the thought of your happiness. I do not recall any expressions that could have escaped me; surely I am not simple enough to have said, or even thought of, anything that would furnish a motive for the icy tone that my little cousin assumed in replying to me."

"Have you the letter with you?"

"I will get it for you in a moment."

Henri went out, and my wife, who had listened in silence, spoke up quickly.

"My friend," she said, "this marriage is broken off; we must think of it no longer."

"Why? Who has broken it off? For what purpose?"

"Miette is rigid and cold; she understands nothing of the requirements of a life of elegance in a certain situation; she is incapable of pardoning a slight wandering from the right path in a young man's life."

"Nonsense! what are you talking about? Miette knows very well all the follies committed by her brother when he studied law in Paris, and I do not believe Henri has a quarter as many to reproach himself for.

However, Miette never manifested any disquietude or vexation ; she received him with open arms when he returned, two years since, as much a seeker after adventures, and as little of a lawyer, as possible. She helped him pay his debts, without a word of reproach or regret. He told this to me not long since, adding that his sister was an angel for indulgence and generosity ; and now you would like—”

Henri, who returned with the letter, interrupted us. This letter was not cold, as he pretended. Emilie was never very demonstrative, and her habitual modesty prevented her from becoming more so ; but it was plain that she was under the influence of a trouble and some kind of fright in her own home that were entirely unusual. “Friendship,” she said, “is indissoluble, and you will always find in me a devoted sister ; but do not distress yourself about marriage ; if time for reflection is necessary for you, it is also necessary for me, and we have made no engagement that we cannot discuss or put off, according to circumstances.”

“You will remark,” observed Henri, addressing me, “that she calls me *you*, instead of *thou*, for the first time.”

“That must be your fault,” I replied. “Let us see ! Come to the fact. Are you really in love, yes or no, with your cousin ?”

“In love ?”

"Yes, passionately in love?"

"He is at a loss how to answer you," said my wife.

"He is asking himself, perhaps, if he ever were so."

Henri seized the line his mother held out.

"Yes," he cried, "that is true! I do not know if the respectful and fraternal sentiment that Miette has inspired in me from childhood can be called love. Passion has never mingled with it on either side."

"And you wish for passion in marriage?"

"Do you think I am wrong?"

"I think nothing about it; I am not making a theory. I wish to know the state of your heart. If Miette Ormonde loved some one else, you would be perfectly satisfied?"

Henri turned pale, and blushed at the same time.

"If she loves another," he replied, in a voice full of emotion, "let her say so! I have no right to oppose her, and I am too proud to allow myself to reproach her."

"Come!" I resumed; "the thing is clear, and the case is settled. Listen: we dined at four o'clock; it is hardly six. You can go to your cousin's in half an hour. You will take Prunelle, your good little mare, who has not been used much during your absence, and who will be enchanted to carry you. You have nothing to say to Miette, excepting that, having this minute arrived, you hasten to grasp her hand and her

brother's. This eagerness is the most concise and clear explanation of what concerns you. You will see if it is received with pleasure or indifference. Nothing more is required for a young man of spirit. Welcomed joyfully, you remain with them an hour, and return to tell us your triumph. Guided by the first words, you come back immediately without asking for anything more. It is very simple, and cuts short all the theories that we could make, as well as all the fine words we could say."

"You are right," replied Henri; "I will go at once."

II.

IN order to pass away the time, my wife took her knitting; I amused myself with a book. I saw, indeed, that she was burning to contradict and quarrel with me, and I pretended not to suspect it; but she burst out at last, and I let her alone to find out her thoughts. I discovered that her son's marriage with Miette had become undesirable in her mind, and that her letters or words had produced some influence in the estrangement of the lovers. She no longer loved her poor niece, and found her too much of a vine-dresser, too humbly born, for her son; her fortune was suitable, but Henri was an only son, and could aspire

to a richer heiress. He had luxurious tastes and habits that Miette would never understand. She had made of her brother, once brilliant and polished, a great peasant, fast growing into unwieldy proportions. She had all the virtues as well as all the prejudice and obstinacy of a countrywoman. It was allowable to think of this marriage when Henri was still a scholar and a provincial. Now that he had come back from Paris in all the splendor of his beauty, his toilet, and his grand manners, he must look for a woman of quality, one capable of becoming a woman of the world.

I listened to all this in silence, and when it was ended I said :

“Do you wish me to draw a conclusion?”

“Yes; speak.”

“Well, if this marriage is detestable, it is neither Henri’s nor Miette’s fault; it is the fault of the great Tower of Perceмонт!”

“Indeed!”

“Yes; without this accursed tower we should always be the good and happy citizens of former times, and we should not find my sister’s children too much like peasants; but since we have machicolations above our vines, and an ornamented door to our wine-press—”

“A wine-press! You do not intend to make a wine-press of our château?”

“Yes, my dear friend; and if this does not put an

end to your folly, I intend to pull down the old barrack!"

"You cannot do this!" cried Madame Chantabel, indignantly. "The château is your son's: you gave it to him."

"When he sees that the château has turned your brain, he will help me demolish it."

My wife was afraid of raillery. She grew calm, and promised to wait patiently for Emilie's decision; but she soon had a new source of agitation. The hours passed, and Henri did not return. I was rejoiced; I thought his cousins had kept him, and that all three were very happy in seeing each other once more. At last it was midnight, and my wife, fearing some accident, was going back and forth from the garden to the road, when the steps of Henri's little mare were heard, and a moment after he was close by us.

"Nothing happened to me," he replied to his mother, who questioned him with great anxiety. "I saw Emilie a moment, and I learned that her brother had been living for a month on his farm in Champgousse, where he is having a large building put up. Emilie, being alone at home, gave me to understand that I must not prolong my visit; and, as it was still early, I directed my course to Champgousse to see Jacques. I did not remember the road, and went farther than was necessary. At last I saw Jacques, talked and

smoked an hour with him, and here I am after riding three leagues on my way back through intricate paths which, without the intelligence of my horse, I should not easily have recognized in the obscurity."

"And how did Emilie receive you?" asked Madame Chantabel.

"Very pleasantly," replied Henri, "as nearly as I could judge in so short a time."

"No chiding, no reproaches?"

"None at all."

"And Jacques?"

"He was as cordial as usual."

"Then nothing is decided?"

"The subject of marriage was not agitated. That is a question we must discuss with you."

My wife, reassured, retired to her room, and immediately Henri took my arm and drew me to the garden.

"I must speak to you," he said. "What I have to tell you is very delicate, and I feared that my mother would take the matter so much to heart that she would not be prudent. This is what happened to me."

"Sit down," I said, "and I will listen to you."

Henri, very much troubled, related to me what follows :

III.

"FIRST, I must tell you the state of my feelings when I was going to see Emilie. It is very true that before quitting Parisian life I had a feeling of terror in thinking of marriage. The ideal dreamed of in my early youth had grown fainter year after year in the feverish atmosphere of the capital. You saw me so in love with my cousin when I began my study of the law that you were afraid—I well understood it—of seeing my progress in my studies retarded by impatience to get through with them. You did not understand that this fervor of love and marriage was a phase of collegiate life, and found its natural place between the baccalaureate and the first law-entry. Perhaps you did not foresee that the impatience would very quickly be calmed, and, perhaps, desiring this marriage, you would have done better to allow me to come home in the vacations. You thought it your duty to divert me from an anxiety that I never felt after the first year's absence. You passed your own vacations with me, traveled with me, took me to the sea-shore, to Switzerland, and then to Florence and Rome—in short, you so well fulfilled your duty that I did not see Emilie for four years. The result is, that I dreaded to see her again lest I should find her no longer as charming as

she had appeared to me in the splendor of her eighteen years.

"I thought of this while galloping toward her abode just as the sun was setting, and was tempted to moderate Prunelle's ardor, who went on the wings of the wind. She was forced, however, to do this for herself as we approached Vignollette, and to go at a slow pace up the sandy ascent that must be climbed to gain a view of the roof of the house buried in the foliage. There my disturbed spirit also grew calm, and an indescribably tender emotion took possession of my heart. The evening was beautiful; there was a golden glow in the heavens and on the earth. The mountains appeared in the mists of a rosy violet tint. The road shone under my feet like the dust of rubies. The vines waved playfully on the hills, and the great purpled branches, loaded with fruit already black, stood erect and hung in abundant festoons over my head. Pardon me, I became a poet! My happy, youthful days appeared once more. I dreamed over the scenes of my forgotten pastorals. I fancied myself transported to the time when, in my collegian's garb—too short for my great lean arms—I approached with a palpitating heart the abode of my little cousin, then so pretty, gracious, and confiding! I recommenced my love-dreams, and it seemed to me that hopes and desires which had taken entire possession of my being

could not be a vain illusion. I spurred on my horse, and arrived, panting, feverish, fearful, and passionately in love as when I was seventeen years old!

“Do not be impatient, my father. I must sum up what was the past a few hours ago, a past already more than a century from the present.

“I trembled when knocking at the door—that little door painted green, still frayed and mended with great nails as in former times. I took pleasure in recognizing every object and in finding the wild honeysuckle shading the rustic entrance as fresh as ever and grown into a great bush. Formerly an iron wire extending along this arbor of vines was sufficient to give entrance to familiar acquaintances without troubling any one; but this hospitable confidence had disappeared; I had to wait at least five minutes. I said to myself: ‘Emilie is alone, and perhaps she is at the end of the inclosure. It takes time to cross the vineyard, but she must have recognized my peculiar way of knocking; she will come and open the door for me as in the old times!’

“She did not come; old Nicole opened the door and took hold of my horse’s bridle with an eagerness full of trouble. ‘Enter, enter, M. Henri! Yes, yes, mademoiselle is very well; she is at home, M. Henri; you must excuse us, it is washing-day, our people have all gone to the river to bring back the linen; this is

the reason you had to wait. These are the days when everything is topsy-turvy, you know very well, M. Henri.'

"I cleared quickly the long and narrow walk, at least too long for my liking ! Formerly they recognized my voice at a distance, and Jacques ran to meet me. Jacques was absent. Emilie came to meet me at the head of the flight of steps. She held out her hand first ; but there was more terror than joy in her surprise at seeing me. She was dressed as she used to be, in a half-girlish fashion, the muslin dress well turned back on the hips, the silk apron trimmed with lace, the little straw hat of peasant-shape turned back behind over her magnificent braids of brown hair—still as pretty as ever, perhaps even prettier ! Her fresh countenance had become a little more oval in form, her eyes were larger, and a more serious expression rendered her glance more penetrating, her smile more full of meaning. I do not know what we said to each other ; we were both very much moved. We asked about the news, and we did not listen to the answers.

"I understood at last that Jacques (Jaquet, as she always calls him) was putting up buildings on a farm two leagues away. Champgousse is his part of the inheritance. For a long time the stables and barns had been going to ruin. He did not wish to trust the work to a contractor, who would have charged him a

high price without doing things to suit him. He had, therefore, installed himself with his tenants, so as to be there from sunrise to sunset, and watch the labor of his workmen.

“‘But he comes to see you every day?’

“‘No, it is too far away ; this would oblige him to rise too early. I am going to see him next Sunday, and be sure that he does not want for anything.’

“‘It must be very tedious for him to be there alone?’

“‘No, he is so busy!’

“‘But does not this solitude make you sad?’

“‘I have no time to think of it ; there is always so much to do when one has a home to take care of.’

“‘You must come and live with us!’

“‘That is impossible.’

“‘You are, then, still a model housekeeper?’

“‘It is necessary.’

“‘And you like this austere life?’

“‘As well as I ever did.’

“‘You do not think—’

“‘Of what?’

“I believe I came near committing myself, when Emilie rose abruptly as she heard the creaking of the door of the dining-room which adjoins the *salon* ; she rushed forward in that direction, and I heard very dis-

tinctly these words, 'He is there—do not let him see you!'

"You start with surprise, father. I felt a rending of the heart. I heard the door shut, and Emilie returned, very much preoccupied and constrained, to ask me idle questions about your health and what you were doing; for she knows everything that concerns you, and it was I who should have learned the news from her. I saw that my presence was torture to her, and that her eyes watched the clock in spite of herself to count the insupportable minutes of my stay. I took my hat, saying that I had scarcely seen you, and, besides, I did not wish to constrain her. 'You are right,' she replied. 'You cannot come here as you used to—I am alone in the house, and this would not be proper; but if you will go next Sunday to see Jaquet at Champgousse, we shall meet there.' I do not remember if I made any reply. I set out, running as if my clothes were on fire, went myself to the stable for Prunelle, and started at full speed on the road that would take me home. And then I stopped short, asking myself if I were dreaming, and if I were not insane. 'Miette Ormonde unfaithful, or concealing a lover in her house! No, it is impossible,' I said; 'but I wish to know and I will know! I will go and see Jacques. I will question him frankly. He is an honest man; he is my friend, and will tell me the truth.'

"I took the cross-road that leads to Champgousse. I lost my way sometimes, for it was entirely dark. At last I arrive in the obscurity, and catch a glimpse of the mass of buildings, which do not appear to me noticeably changed. I dismount in the midst of furious dogs. I look for the door of the master's dwelling, when suddenly it half opens. In the light projected from the interior, I see the outline of Jacques Ormonde's silhouette in the attitude of getting out of bed.

"He throws himself into my arms, clasps me vigorously in his, cries out that he had gone to bed, and that he came very near taking his gun to receive me, for he thought it was a robber, the dogs made such an uproar. He took possession of Prunelle, and, still half naked, led her himself to the stable, where I followed to assist him in unbridling her. 'Let me do it,' he said, 'you cannot see. I see in the night like an owl, and then I know where to find everything.' In truth, he makes all the arrangements, gives water, grain, forage, to his 'little friend Prunelle,' returns without having waked any one, distributes plentiful kicks to his dogs, who still growl at me, makes me enter into his summer-room, whose sole luxury consists in guns of all calibres and pipes of all dimensions. There were neither books, an inkstand, nor pens; all was exactly like his student's room in the Latin Quarter.

“‘Ah! how long since you arrived in the country?’

“‘Since some time this afternoon.’

“‘And you come to see me immediately? That is pleasant, indeed; and I thank you. How do they all do at your house? Truly, it is more than a month since I have seen your parents. I have so much to do here! I cannot leave; but they knew where I pitch my tent this time, since you surprise me here.’

“‘They knew absolutely nothing, for they sent me to Vignollette, where I expected to find you.’

“‘Here Jaquet’s expressive face became distorted, and the great fellow blushed like a young woman at the least surprise. He exclaimed, in a tone full of fear and distress: ‘You come from Vignollette? You have seen my sister?’

“‘Reassure yourself,’ I replied; ‘I have seen no one but her.’

“‘You have only seen *her*? She has, then, told you—’

“‘She has told me everything,’ I replied, with assurance, wishing at any price to profit by his emotion in order to snatch the truth from him.

“‘She told you—but you did not see the *other*?’

“‘I did not see the *other*.’

“‘She told you her name?’

“‘She did not tell me *her* name.’

“‘She intrusted the secret to you?’

“‘She intrusted nothing to me.’

“‘Ah, well! I ask in the name of honor, and in the name of the friendship you have for us, not a word of what you have found out! Will you swear not to reveal it?’

“‘I have no need to swear when Emilie’s honor is at stake.’

“‘That is right. I am an imbecile. But you must take some refreshment, or smoke a pipe, a cigar—which do you wish? Take, choose; I am going down-cellar.’

“‘Do not take so much trouble.’

“‘It is very little trouble,’ he replied, opening a trap-door in the middle of the room. ‘My provision is always at hand.’

“‘And in a moment he descended two steps, and returned, bearing a basket of bottles of every growth in his vineyard.

“‘Thank you,’ I said, ‘but I have lost the habit of drinking wine in the way of refreshment. Have you any *eau piquante*?’

“‘Truly; the acidulated source runs at my door. Here it is entirely fresh; put a little brandy in it. Hold! here is *fin champagne* and sugar; make some grog for yourself.’

“‘I saw that, in serving me according to my taste,

he uncorked his own wine, to drink himself; and, knowing how wine loosens the tongue, I feigned a great thirst, to induce him to drink on his side. I hoped for the revelation of the grand secret; but it was useless to swallow the wine of his hills; he always changed the conversation with an address of which I did not believe him capable.

"Besides, I quickly gave up the *rôle*. Why did I want to know the name of the man who had taken possession of my place in Emilie's heart? She ought to have said to me frankly: 'I do not love you any longer; I am going to marry some one else.' Jacques appeared to think that she had told me so. I wished to go directly to the fact, and I interrupted him in the midst of his digressions to say: 'Let us talk about serious affairs. When is the marriage to take place?'

" 'My marriage?' he replied, candidly. 'Indeed, I must wait a month before being able to declare myself openly.'

" 'You have, then, marriage projects on your own account?'

" 'Yes, great projects; but do not ask me to tell you anything more. I am very much in love, and I hope to marry—that is all. A month hence you will be the first one in whom I shall confide.'

" 'That is to say, that you will never confide in me

in the present chapter, for in a month you will have forgotten it, and you will commence another.'

"'It is true that I am unsteady. I have given too many proofs to deny it; but this time it is serious, very serious, upon my word of honor!'

"'So be it; but I did not speak of your marriage. Do not pretend to misunderstand me. I spoke of Emilie's marriage.'

"'Of my sister's marriage with you? Ah! that, unfortunately, is a doubtful question, to my great regret.'

"'A doubtful question" is a charming expression!' I exclaimed, bitterly.

"He did not allow me to continue.

"'Yes, certainly,' he said, 'it is broken. You ought not to complain, for it is according to your wish. Did you not write to Miette, a month or six weeks since, a kind of veiled confession, in which you doubted of the possibility of her pardon, and appeared to make up your mind with a very resigned sorrow? I understood very well, and, questioned by her, I told her in a pleasant way that the pleasures of youth were not a grave thing, and did not prevent true love from becoming again serious. She did not know what I meant; she asked me a number of questions too delicate to make it possible for me to reply to them. Then she went to see your parents; your father was

not at home. She talked with your mother, who did not conceal from her that you were leading a gay life in Paris, and laughed in her face when she manifested astonishment. My dear aunt has sometimes a brusque frankness. She gave Miette clearly to understand that, if your infidelity scandalized her, the family would be easily consoled in spite of her. There would be no difficulty in procuring a finer establishment for you. Poor Miette was entirely cast down, and repeated the conversation just as it occurred, without any reflections of her own. I wished to console her; she said, "It is unnecessary for any one to teach me what my duty is;" and, if she wept, I did not see it. I think she has had a great sorrow, but she is too proud to own it, and, from the moment she knew of your mother's aversion to your marriage, I do not believe she ever wishes to hear it spoken of.'

"Surprised and angry to know that my mother indulged such feelings, but not wishing to learn through those she had wounded their grievances against her—feeling, besides, that the first wrong came from me, and that in my student's life I had made my infidelity too apparent—I asked Jacques to allow me to leave him. 'I am tired,' I said; 'I have a headache, and, if I am vexed, I do not wish to yield to it at this moment. We will put off the explanation to another day. When will you come to breakfast with me?'

“‘You,’ he replied, ‘must pass the day with me on Sunday. Miette will be here, and you can talk the matter over together. You will then have consulted your parents, and know if my sister’s pride was voluntarily wounded; and, as I am sure that you will regret it, you will become good friends.’

“‘Yes, we shall become brother and sister; for I presume she will tell me frankly what she should have told me this evening.’

“Thereupon we separated—he still gay, I sad as death. I had, indeed, a frightful headache, which was relieved by the fresh air; and now I am stupid and bruised like a man who has just fallen from the top of a roof upon the pavement.”

When my son had finished speaking, we looked at each other earnestly, for, while telling the story, he had followed me into the drawing-room.

“I am very well satisfied with your recital,” I said; “it is comparatively clear at the first view. However, if I had, like a judge, to take into consideration the detailed deposition of a witness, I should reproach you for not being very clear-sighted; I should ask if it were very certain that you found a man in Miette Ormonde’s house.”

“I am sure of the words I heard. Would she have said to a woman, in speaking of me, ‘*He is there—do not let him see you?*’ Besides, Jacques’s confession—”

"Presents to my judgment singular ambiguities."

"What?"

"I cannot say. I must reflect carefully, and make a serious inquiry. I will spare no pains, if it is necessary—that is, if you are still interested in her. Do you really love her very much? Is the trouble in which I now see you simply the result of wounded pride? Are you offended to see Emilie so susceptible and so quickly consoled? In that case your reason and your goodness of heart will soon gain the ascendancy. The affair will clear up of itself; either Emilie will be justified, and you will still love each other, or she will avow her engagement with another, and you will go philosophically to her wedding. But if, as I think, your sorrow is sufficiently deep—if there is grieved and wounded love in your heart—then Emilie must return to you, and send away the suitor who has insinuated himself into her favor in order to take advantage of her vexation in your absence."

"Emilie ought not to have received the attentions of this pretender. She should have known that I was not a man to contend for a wife who compromised her reputation, and gave herself up to vengeance. I regarded her as a kind of saint; she is now no more in my estimation than a little inconsistent and undignified village coquette."

"Then you ought not to regret her, and you do not regret her?"

"No, father, I do not regret her. I had no longer any desire to be married; but if I had found her such as I knew her, or thought I knew her, I would have offered her my hand and heart out of respect to her and to you. Now I am rejoiced to be able to break the bond without grieving you, and without caring myself for the regret she will feel."

I could not obtain from my son any more softened avowal of his sorrow. He was so inflexible and stern as to disturb the first opinion I had formed, and lead me to think he would be easily consoled. It was late; we agreed to say nothing to my wife, and to put off to the next day our calm judgment upon the strange event of the evening.

IV.

HENRI slept late the next morning, and I had no leisure to talk with him. At nine o'clock my wife announced to me the arrival of the Countess de Nives. I was just getting ready to shave myself, and begged Madame Chantabel to entertain this client until I was ready.

"No," she said, "I dare not. I am not fashionable

enough. This lady is so beautiful, she has so noble an air, with so magnificent a carriage and horses—ah ! true English horses, a coachman who appears like a lord, a footman in livery !”

“All that dazzles you, lady of Percemont !”

“This is not the time to jest, M. Chantabel. What are you doing there, trying your razor a dozen times ? Make haste !”

“I cannot cut my throat to please you. To-day how eager you are to see me run after this countess ! Yesterday you blamed me for accepting her as a client so quickly !”

“I had not seen her. I did not think she held so high a position in the fashionable world. Well ! here are your white cravat and your black coat.”

“No, indeed ! we are in the country ; I will not appear in full dress at nine o'clock in the morning.”

“Yes, yes !” cried my wife, putting on, in spite of me, the dress-cravat. “I wish you to look like what you are !”

To cut the matter short, I was obliged to yield, and I passed into my private room, where Madame de Nives awaited me.

I had never seen her excepting at a distance, and did not expect to find her still so young and beautiful. She was a woman of about forty years of age, tall, blond, and slender. Her manners were excellent. Ex-

cepting for the romance of her life, which I knew *grosso modo*, her reputation was irreproachable.

"I come, sir," she said, "to ask counsel in a very delicate affair, and you will allow me to tell you my story, of which you probably do not know the details. If I encroach upon your time—"

"My time is yours," I replied, and, having seated her in an easy-chair, I listened.

"My name is Alix Dumont. I belong to an honorable but poor family, who brought me up with the expectation of earning my own living. I was a teacher in various boarding-schools for young ladies. When I was twenty-two years old I entered the service of the Countess de Nives, as governess for her only daughter, Marie, then ten years old.

"Madame de Nives treated me with much esteem and confidence. Without her kind consideration, I could not have endured Marie's undisciplined character and fantastic caprices. She was an unreasonable and heartless child, whom no one could restrain. This sad duty was very painful to me; and when, two years later, Madame de Nives died, commending her daughter to my care, I begged the Count de Nives to spare me a task beyond my strength: I wished to go away.

"He would not allow me to leave; he entreated, said that without me his way of living would be broken up, and his daughter abandoned to the chances of an

education that he did not know how to direct. I was obliged to yield. He placed me at the head of his house ; and Marie, who knew she would be obliged to enter a convent if I left, put more restraint upon herself, and begged me to remain.

“The Count de Nives, after having been a widower for a year, announced to me that he wished to marry again, and that he had chosen me for the companion of his life. I refused, on account of the child, whose aversion, I foresaw, would be always ready to burst forth ; and, when he insisted, I took flight, without letting him know where I went. I remained concealed for several months with some of my old friends. He discovered my retreat, and came to entreat me once more to accept his proposal. He had sent Marie to a convent. She accuses me to this day of having separated her from her father. On the contrary, I did my best to bring her back to him. The count was inflexible toward her even on his death-bed.

“Beset by a passion which in spite of myself I began to share, pressed by my friends to accept the honorable offer of M. de Nives, I became his wife, and am now the mother of a daughter. Her name is Léonie ; she is seven years old, and the living portrait of her father.

“I was happy, for I always cherished the hope of reconciling my husband with his elder daughter, when

he met with a fall while hunting, which he survived only a few days. He left a will in which he made me Marie's guardian, conferring upon me the use of his whole income during my life ; but the income is not large ; M. de Nives's fortune came from his first wife. The estate that I control, and where I live with my daughter, belongs entirely to Marie, and the time approaches when this young person will demand the account of my guardianship, contrary to her father's intention, after which she will turn us out of the house."

Here Madame Alix de Nives was silent, and looked at me to find out my opinion without giving expression to her own thoughts.

"You wish to know," I said, "some means for eluding this sad necessity. There are none. By M. de Nives's will he bestowed upon you the use of all his property, relying upon your character and loyalty to provide for the wants and the establishment of his two daughters. He could not confer upon you the right to dispose of the estate of his deceased wife. Have you brought the will and the two marriage-contracts of the Count de Nives?"

"Yes, here they are."

When I had examined the documents, I saw that the deceased had deluded himself with the idea that he had a right to share to a certain point in his first wife's property. He believed that he had power to

control the income of the De Nives estate as long as the landed property, which returned by law to Marie, was not deteriorated or encroached upon.

"My husband took advice before drawing up this will," said the countess, with a doubtful air, seeing me shrug my shoulders.

"He could take advice, madame, but no trustworthy lawyer could have given him counsel to make a will like this."

"Pardon me, it was—"

"Do not tell me who, for I am forced to insist that this lawyer, if he is a lawyer, greatly misled him."

The countess bit her lips with vexation.

"M. de Nives," she resumed, "always regarded Marie as a person without judgment or reason, and incapable of managing her affairs. He destined her for the cloister. If he had lived, he would have obliged her to take the vows."

"M. de Nives was the victim of an illusion in this case also; ancient families sometimes neglect to gain information on present usage. I have heard that M. de Nives did not always take into account what has been introduced into legislation since 1789; but you, madame, who are still young, and must by your education have overcome certain prejudices, do you admit that a legitimate heiress can be forced to resign her rights and enter a convent?"

"No, but the law can place her in custody and deprive her of the power to exercise her civil rights if she has given proof of insanity."

"That is another question ! Is Mademoiselle Marie de Nives really insane ?"

"Did you never hear of it, M. Chantabel ?"

"I have heard that she was odd ; but they say so many things !"

"Public opinion has, however, its value."

"Not always."

"You astonish me, sir ; public opinion is on my side ; it has always done me justice ; it would still be for me if I invoked it."

"Take care, madame ! one must not risk too much the good reputation that it has taken long to acquire. I believe that if you should apply for a judgment of deprivation of civil rights against Mademoiselle de Nives, you would make partisans on her side who would go against you."

"Does that mean, sir, that you are already prejudiced against me ?"

"No, madame ; I have the honor to speak to you to-day for the first time, and I have never seen Mademoiselle de Nives. But examine your situation. Poor and without name, but beautiful and educated, you enter into a house whose chief, soon a widower, marries you after having sent away a witness whose

hostile presence could create for you nothing but trouble and sorrow. This witness is only a child, but it is his own daughter whom he sends away, and who attributes her exile to you. You did, you say, your best to bring her back again. It is unfortunate that you did not succeed ; it is unfortunate, also, that your husband's will reveals a preference for you that effaces all paternal affection from his heart. Certain persons might think that Mademoiselle Marie's misfortune is your work, and, if she is insane, that you have done everything to make her so."

"I see, M. Chantabel, that your ear is open to cruel insinuations against me."

"I swear that it is not so, madame ! My judgment springs from the situation in which you are placed and the counsel you ask of me. Let us go on. What are the proofs of insanity given by your step-daughter ?"

"There are more than I could ever tell you. Ever since she was ten years old, she has been rebellious against all discipline, furious against all restraint. Her nature is abnormal, capable of every kind of misconduct. I dare not tell you—"

"Tell me everything or nothing."

"Very well. I believe that, in spite of the seclusion of the convent, she found means more than once to have guilty relations with—"

"You believe this?"

"And you, you doubt? Very well! I must trust you with a very grave secret. While she lived with the nuns at Riom she was discovered to be carrying on an intrigue with some person outside. I had her transferred to the convent of Clermont, which is more severe in its discipline. Do you know what she did there? She disappeared entirely, sending me a letter in which she declares that she cannot stay in that convent—that she is going to Paris to enter of her own free-will the convent of the *Sacré-Cœur*, where she will remain until the day of her majority."

"Indeed! You must allow her to do so."

"Yes, I ask nothing better, but I must be assured that this pretended change of community does not conceal an elopement or something still worse. I begged at once the nuns of Clermont to say that she ran away to return to my house, and then I went immediately to Paris. Marie was not at the *Sacré-Cœur*; she was not in any other convent of the city nor its environs. She has evidently fled with some man, for the traces of very large feet were seen on the gravel-walk of the garden from which she took her flight."

"This is not insanity, as it is understood in legal medicine. It is simply misconduct."

"This misconduct imposes upon the guardian the

duty of finding the guilty person and reinstating her in some convent of the most severe order."

"Agreed! Have you accomplished this?"

"No. I passed a whole month in useless search, and, tired out, I returned to my little Léonie, from whom I could not be separated any longer. I did not wish to trust to any one the sorrowful secret that you have just heard, but it is necessary that I should act, and I came to ask you what I ought to do. Must I apply to the courts, to the police, or in what proper quarter, in order to have Marie discovered and snatched from infamy? Or rather must I keep silent, conceal her disgrace, and suffer her to ruin me and drive me away from my husband's house? In case this wicked girl should be declared incapable of managing her affairs, she will still have to thank me for defending her immodesty under the plea of insanity. In case I let her go unpunished, should I fulfill my duty to my own daughter, who will be banished and despoiled without my having made an attempt to save her?"

"You must give me time to reflect, and to review the facts with you, before I pronounce judgment."

"But time presses, sir! Marie will be of age in twenty-nine days. If any attempt is to be made, it would be proper to announce to the court and the public the fact of her disappearance before she gets

the start of me by putting in her claims and entering into possession."

"If she is ready to put in her claims, and reappears at the appointed time, she is not insane, and every one will believe that she is in full possession of her reason. You would then have nothing but the charge of misconduct against her. This will be of no avail from the day when your guardianship ceases. No text of law can deprive of her rights and liberty a girl twenty-one years of age who was simply guilty of a folly a month before. Something else would be necessary to prove that she was deprived of reason besides a love-affair through a grating, and an escape over the walls of a convent."

Madame de Nives listened to me attentively, and her glance questioned me with grievous intensity. Was she avaricious of money and comfort to such a degree as to risk everything to escape restitution? Was she moved by maternal love or by one of those feminine spites that prevent the understanding from following a prudent course? Her beauty had at the first view a character of distinction and serenity. At this moment she was so agitated inwardly that she caused in me a vague sensation of fright, as if the devil in person had come to ask me how to set the four corners of the world on fire.

My scrutinizing look made her own hesitate.

"Sir," she said, rising and taking a few steps, as if she had cramps in her limbs, "you are very hard to persuade. I expected to find in you counsel and support. I find an examining magistrate who wishes to be more sure than I am myself of the goodness of my cause."

"It is my duty, madame. I am not at the commencement of my career; I have no need to gain a name by putting my talent at the service of the first occasion that presents itself. I do not like to lose a suit, and all the eulogies which the whole world could heap upon me for having pleaded skillfully would not console me for having accepted the defense of a bad cause."

"It is because such is your character," replied Madame de Nives, in a caressing tone, "it is because you have a reputation for scrupulous integrity, it is, finally, because a cause sustained by you is almost always a cause gained beforehand, that I desired to trust mine to you. If you refuse, it will be a great precedent against me."

"If I refuse, madame, it is very easy to keep secret the step you have taken in coming to see me. Choose whatever course you please, and I will act in conformity with your purpose."

"Then you refuse to go further?"

"I have not refused—I am waiting for you to

furnish me with proofs that will satisfy my conscience."

"You wish for more details about Marie de Nives? Well, this is her history. I have told you her character; here are the facts."

The countess sat down again in the easy-chair, and spoke thus: "At eleven years of age this unhappy child was already an inexplicable compound of delirious folly and profound dissimulation. You think these two traits of character are incompatible. You are mistaken. Marie pretended to adore her mother, and perhaps she did love her after her own fashion. But she never cared for the trouble she caused her if she could only run at random and play truant with the little peasants of the neighborhood. Neither did she care for her mother's suffering when she risked her life in dangerous sports with boys. She mounted the horses in the fields, and galloped without saddle or bridle, at the risk of serious accidents. She climbed trees; she fell, and came home with her clothes torn to pieces; often she was wounded. Here was the delirium, the passion of a violent nature."

"It was a little, I have been told, the character of her father."

"Possibly, sir. He was passionate and impetuous; but he was sincere, and Marie is skillfully deceitful. She will invent all kinds of stories to lay upon others

the blame of her faults. When her mother died she was a prey to a despair that seemed to me sincere, but a few days after she began again to play and to run wild."

"She was eleven years old! At that age one cannot weep for a long time without a violent reaction in the direction of active life; that sometimes happens even to grown-up persons."

"Very well, sir; you are pleading for her!"

"I tell you I am not acquainted with her."

"It is certain that you are prepossessed in her favor by some one. Wait a moment—you have a relation, a niece, I think, who was with her at the convent at Riom—it was a young lady—pardon me, I have forgotten her name. Marie called her the dear little Miette."

I could not help starting, such a lively commotion was produced in my brain. The person concealed the evening before at Emilie's house—concealed, perhaps, for a month—to whom she had said, "*Do not let him see you!*"—the *quid pro quos* between Jacques and my son—that hope of marriage announced by Jacques to be, perhaps, confided to my son *in a month*—those prints of great boots on the gravel-walk of the garden of the Clermont nuns! Was the great Jacques Ormonde the perpetrator of the abduction? Was Miette Ormonde, the long-time friend of the convent, the receiver?

"What is the matter, M. Chantabel?" said Madame de Nives, who was watching me. I had instinctively put my hand to my forehead to collect my ideas. "Are you tired of listening to me?"

"No, madame ; I am trying to remember. Truly, I cannot recall that Mademoiselle Ormonde, my niece, has ever spoken to me of Mademoiselle de Nives."

"Then I will continue."

"Do so. I am listening."

"When Marie saw that I sincerely mourned for her mother, she seemed to change her opinion in regard to me, and, bursting into tears, she embraced me, thanking me for having taken faithful care of the dying. I believed that better feelings had taken possession of her heart : she deceived me. When she heard her father beg me to remain, she became disagreeable and outrageous. I then resolved to go away, and announced my determination ; but her father said she should go into a convent, and she threw herself at my feet to beg me to remain. Two days later she resisted and abused me again. Her fear of the convent could not overcome her hatred and wickedness."

"Bad character, aversion, provoked perhaps by yours, natural impetuosity, the unreasonableness of childhood, inconsistency in passion ; I grant all this, but I do not yet see any proof of mental alienation."

"Wait. When her father, during my absence, had

put her in the convent, telling her that she should never come out, there were, I am told, outbursts of despair. The nuns treated her with great gentleness and kindness. She very quickly made up her mind, and, as they talked to her of the happiness of a religious life, she told them that she was inclined to try it. She appeared really to be very pious, and the nuns were fond of her. When M. de Nives, after our marriage, brought me home, I went to make inquiries concerning her. She was entirely engrossed with amusements, and very idle; she learned nothing, but they believed her good and sincere. I asked to see her. She received me kindly, for she imagined I was going to take her home. I was obliged to tell her that I would give a good account of her conduct to M. de Nives, and would plead her cause, but that I had received no permission to carry her away immediately.

“When the superior called me *madame* as a mark of respect, Marie asked why she did not say *mademoiselle*. It was wrong to allow her to remain ignorant of my marriage, and that I was henceforth Madame de Nives. It was necessary to explain the matter to her. She fell into a transport of ungovernable rage, and had to be carried away by force, and shut up. Her fury subsided as quickly as it came. She was thirteen and a half years old. She wished to enter at once upon her novitiate, and could hardly be made to comprehend

that she was too young, and that while waiting she must strive to improve.

"She worked for a year, but without method, and like a person whose brain is not susceptible of the least application. The teachers tell me that she was not malicious, but slightly idiotic. They were only half mistaken—she is idiotic and malicious.

"I tried to believe them, and was the dupe of her submission. She wrote a letter to her father, deficient in composition and orthography, such as a child six years old would have written, to tell him that she had decided to take the vows next year, and that she only asked to see once more the room where her mother died, and to embrace her little sister Léonie. I begged M. de Nives to grant her this favor, and offered to go for her. He refused emphatically. 'Never!' he said. 'On the day after her mother's death she threatened to set the house on fire if I married again. She wished me to swear not to give her a step-mother. She had her head full of the servants' gossip in regard to you. She declared if I had other children that she would strangle them. She is mad, dangerously mad! She is well off at the convent; religion is the only restraint that can calm her. Write to her that I will go to see her some years hence, when she has taken the veil.'

"In the mean time, M. de Nives died without hav-


ing revoked his decision. Marie manifested a violent sorrow, but resisted the advice of the nuns, who wished her to write to me. They told her, from me, that I was disposed to take her home if she took the least step to conciliate me. She rejected the advice with perfect fury, saying that I had killed her father and mother, and that she would rather die than put her foot in the house."

"Does she really accuse you of this?"

"She accuses me of almost every crime. How can this furious hatred and these outrages be reconciled with the devotion she manifested at the same time? However, I still believed in her religious vocation. These terrible and insane beings can only find alleviation in the mystic life."

"I think exactly the opposite. The mystic life exasperates the troubled mind. It is no matter; go on."

"Notwithstanding her apparent devotion to religion, Marie began, as she grew older, to long for worldly joys, and one day it was discovered that she was carrying on an amorous correspondence outside of the convent with a student whose name was unknown, but whose orthography was parallel with her own. Therefore, I removed Marie, who was becoming too large to incur such dangers (she was nearly fifteen years old), to the cloistered convent of the nuns of



Clermont. She seemed at first rebellious, afterward very gentle, and then very much taken up with amusements. She changed her character and disposition every fortnight. I have all the letters of the superior, which describe her as a person whose insanity is beyond question. Marie is not even fit for a nun. She will never be restrained by any rule ; she is wanting in intelligence, and the least reasoning exasperates her ; she has also nervous attacks, which border on epilepsy ; she cries, appears as if she would tear herself in pieces, tries to kill herself. She inspires such fear that they are forced to shut her up. This convent will furnish all the proofs I need, and I have already a certain quantity that I will place in your hands if you accept the defense of my legitimate interests."

“ And if I did not accept, what would you do, madame ? Would you renounce a pursuit that offers serious dangers to the honor of both parties ? I am willing to believe that the proofs held by you in reserve are overwhelming against Mademoiselle de Nives. Even if I admit that you could succeed in finding out her hiding-place, and that you have the means of dishonoring her in establishing the truth of a shameful folly, do you not fear that the advocate who will defend her cause will impute to you the misfortune of this young woman, sacrificed by her father, repulsed, persecuted (it will be said), driven to despair by your

hatred? If you wish to follow my advice, you would go no further, you would ignore Mademoiselle de Nives's flight, and await her approaching majority. If she should not appear at that time, your cause would become better, perhaps good. You would have a right to search out the place of her concealment, and to put the police on her track; then we should probably find incontestable proofs of her incapacity. We would make the most of them. I should have no more conscientious scruples. Reflect, madame—I beg you to reflect!"

"I reflected before I came here," replied Madame de Nives, in an unmoved tone, "and I have fully resolved to listen to no counsel that will result in both my own and my daughter's ruin. If I await events, they may indeed be favorable; but if they are not so—if Marie, in spite of her misconduct, is acknowledged to be capable of managing her property—I have no defense against her."

"And you positively wish for it? Whether she is innocent or not, you wish for her fortune at any price?"

"I do not wish for her fortune, which remains inalienable. I want the management of it, according to my husband's desire."

"Very well! You are not taking the path that leads to success, if you attempt to bring dishonor upon

the heiress. In your place I should wait for her appearance, and then endeavor to make a compromise with her."

"What compromise?"

"If her reputation is really lost, you can make her feel the price of the generous silence you have kept, and perhaps induce her to refrain from demanding the accounts of your guardianship up to the present day."

"Sell my generosity? I would rather have open war; but, if there is no other means of saving my daughter, I must resign myself to it. I will reflect, sir, and, if I follow your advice, will you promise to serve me as an intermediate agent?"

"Yes, if you can fully prove that your step-daughter's reputation is lost, and that your silence is necessary. I shall then act in her interest as well as yours, for you do not appear to be generous for the pleasure of being so."

"No, sir; I am a mother, and I will not sacrifice my daughter in order to be acceptable to my enemy. But you speak of the account of my guardianship. Has she, then, a right to demand a very strict account?"

"Without any doubt; and, as she has been brought up in the convent, it will be easy to establish very nearly what you have spent for her education and maintenance. It will not be a large sum, and, if I am

rightly informed, the income of the De Nives estate exceeds thirty-five or forty thousand francs a year."

"That is exaggerated ! "

"The rents will give evidence. Suppose it only thirty thousand francs. Have you calculated the amount during the twelve years that you have enjoyed the income ? "

"Yes ; if I am forced to restore this income, I am absolutely ruined. M. de Nives did not leave a hundred thousand francs of principal."

"With that, if you are not forced to make restitution for the past, and if, as I believe, you have been prudent enough to be economical in your expenditure, you will not live in poverty, madame. You are considered an economical and orderly person. You have education and talents, you will yourself attend to the education of your daughter, and you will learn to do without luxury, or procure it by your labor. At all events, you will both enjoy an independent and worthy existence. Do not involve yourself in the disastrous issue of a lawsuit which will not bring honor to your character, and will cost you very dear, I forewarn you. There is nothing so long and so difficult as to exclude from the exercise of her civil rights one even much more alienated in mind than Mademoiselle de Nives appears to be."

"I will reflect," replied Madame de Nives, "as I

promised. I thank you, sir, for the attention you have given me, and I ask pardon for the time you have lost in listening to me."

I conducted her to her carriage, and she set out for the De Nives estate, situated five leagues from Riom, on the road to Clermont. I remarked—for I have a habit of remarking everything—that the English horses that had dazzled my wife were thoroughly worn-out animals, and that the servants in livery were very shabby. It was evident that this woman sacrificed nothing to luxury.

V.

My wife and son were waiting breakfast for me.

"I shall not take breakfast," I said to them. "I will merely swallow a cup of coffee while Bibi is being put into the tilbury. I shall not return till three or four o'clock."

While I gave my orders, I examined my son stealthily. His features seemed distorted.

"Did you sleep well?" I asked.

"Never better," he replied. "I found my pleasant chamber and my comfortable bed delightful."

"What are you going to do this afternoon?"

"I will go with you, if I am not in your way."

"You would be in my way; I speak frankly. I hope to tell you this evening that you will never be in my way again. And even now—I ask you not to go away, because I may return at any moment to give you this information."

"You are going to see Emilie, father? I beg you not to question her, not to speak to her of me. I should suffer mortal agony to have her come back to me after having welcomed another. I have reflected: I do not love her, I never have loved her!"

"I do not expect to see Emilie. I am going on professional business. Not a word of Emilie before your mother!"

Madame Chantabel returned with my coffee. While taking it, I asked Henri to examine the old château and choose the apartment he wished to have arranged as a rendezvous for hunting. He promised not to think of anything else, and I took my seat alone in my little cabriolet. I needed no servant to drive the peaceable and vigorous Bibi, and desired no witness of the step I was about to take.

I set out on the road to Riom, as if I were going to the city; then, turning to the left, I penetrated the sandy and shady roads that lead to Champgousse.

I marked out my course, but, as in giving counsel it is necessary to take into account the character and the temperament of persons more than the facts and

the situation, I reviewed in my mind the antecedents, qualities, and faults of my nephew, Jacques Ormonde. The son of my sister, who was the most beautiful woman in the country, Jacques had been a very beautiful child, and, as he had good-nature, we all adored him. It is a misfortune for a man to be too handsome, and to be constantly told of it. The child was idle, and the young man grew foppish. What can be more agreeable, at the age when one thinks of love, than to read a welcome, bold or bashful, in earnest in every case, in all the women's eyes? Jacques had a precocious success; his herculean strength did not exert an unfavorable influence upon his character, but his intellectual strength succumbed to this captious reasoning: "If, without cultivating my moral being, I attain with the greatest ease the triumph which is the feverish aim of youth, why need I spend time and trouble in improving myself?"

Thus he did not study, and his utmost attainment was some knowledge of his own language. He possessed natural intelligence, and that kind of facility that consists in assimilating the top of the basket without caring for what there is in the bottom. He could talk about everything in a lively way, and pass for an eagle in the eyes of the ignorant. As he was brought up in the country, he was well acquainted with the produce and the culture of the land. He

knew all the secrets of the horse-jockeys, and made the most of his cattle and commodities. The peasants looked upon him as a sharp fellow, and consulted him with respect. His proverbial honesty with honest people, his familiar and cordial frankness, and his unwearying desire to oblige, made him a general favorite. It was a common saying among the peasants that the great Jacques was the best, the handsomest, and the most intelligent man to be found among the farms and villages in the neighborhood.

After finishing his college course, where he had learned nothing, he went to Paris to study law, where he devoted himself to a life of worldly pleasure. His years of study were a perpetual *fête*. Rich, generous, eager for a good time, and always ready to do nothing, he had numerous friends, squandered his income, wasted his youth, health, brain, and character, and gave us great uneasiness while seeing him prolong indefinitely his pretended studies.

But at the bottom of all this thoughtlessness my beautiful nephew inherited with his blood an effective means of safety. He had an inborn love of property, and, when it was plain that he must quit this gay life or encroach upon his capital, he returned to the country, and did not again leave it.

His estate of Champgousse was well rented, but the lease had run out, and he managed to renew it,

with a considerable increase in the rent, without driving away his tenants; even under these conditions he found out the secret of making himself much beloved. He formed a plan for building a fine house, but he was in no hurry to carry it out. Vignollette, the paternal mansion, fell to his sister Emilie's share. It was a habitation charming for its simplicity—a luxuriant inclosure of flowers and fruits, in a country adorable for freshness and beauty in that fertile region that extends between the river Morge and the latest eruptions of lava from the Dome Mountains toward the north. Miette was so tenderly attached to this dwelling, where she had closed the eyes of her parents, that she preferred to give up to her brother the larger portion of the landed inheritance, and keep the vineyard and house of Vignollette. She lived there alone with my aged sister Anastasic during Jacques's absence, and cared tenderly for this good aunt, who died in her arms, leaving to her all her property, consisting of a hundred thousand francs invested in government funds.

As soon as Miette came in possession of this legacy she wrote to her brother, then in Paris: "I know that you are in debt, as you have directed our notary to sell your meadow and woodland of chestnut-trees. I do not want you to encroach upon your property. I have money; if you wish for a hundred thousand francs, they are at your service."

Jacques's debts did not amount to half that sum. They were paid, and he returned, resolved never to run in debt again.

He decided to live at Vignollette with Emilie, who was left entirely alone by the death of her aunt, and he put off his plan of building at Champgousse until Emilie's marriage took place.

During the two years that he had lived with her his gay life had taken on a character strangely practical. He carefully concealed his wild adventures from the good Emilie ; this was easily accomplished, as she lived in absolute retirement, and hardly ever left her home. He had hunting rendezvous in all directions, and he joined with his friends in pleasure-parties in every season of the year.

Jacques had nearly reached his thirtieth year and had never spoken of marriage. He was so happy in his liberty, and used it so well ! He was growing very stout ; his complexion, once fair as a girl's, had taken a purplish lustre in striking contrast with his silver-blond hair. He had one of those faces that one sees afar off, with high color, large features, an aquiline nose, which was set off by two natural marks on the skin once charming, now looking a little like warts. The expression was always lively, amiable, but too sparkling to become tender. The mouth remained healthy, but the charm of the smile was effaced. It

was easy to see that wine and other excesses had cut down the flower of a youth still susceptible of abundant growth, and Henri defined very justly the impressive, agreeable, and slightly grotesque appearance of his cousin when he said, "He is a buffoon, still young and good."

Having recapitulated all this, to know how I should open fire with him, I arrived at the entrance of the farm. The workmen told me that M. Jacques was in a wood near by, and offered to call him. I intrusted Bibi to their care, and went quickly in search of my nephew.

VI.

I EXPECTED to see him engaged in hunting, and I found him extended on the turf, and sleeping under a tree. He slept so soundly that I was obliged to touch him lightly with the end of my cane to waken him.

"Ah, uncle!" he cried, starting with a bound upon his great feet, "what a pleasant surprise, and I am so glad to see you! I was just thinking about you!"

"That is to say, you were dreaming about me?"

"Yes, perhaps; I was asleep? It is no matter; you were in my thoughts. You seemed to be angry with me; that is not true, is it?"

"Why should I be angry?"

"Because it is a very long time since I have been to see you; I am so busy here."

"I see that plainly. Fatigue has overpowered you, and you are therefore forced to take a *siesta*, no matter where."

"Come here and see my plans, uncle; you must give me advice."

"Another time. I come now to ask you for information. You know, I am told, a young person who is called Mademoiselle de Nives?"

Jacques started at this brusque attack.

"Who told you so, uncle? I am not acquainted with her."

"But you know persons who are acquainted with her, since Miette is one of them. She must talk to you sometimes of her old friend at the convent?"

"Yes, no—stay! I cannot remember. You would like—what would you like to know?"

"I want to know if she is an idiot."

This brutal word fell like a second stone on Jacques's head, and his vermilion complexion grew slightly pale.

"Idiot! Mademoiselle de Nives an idiot! Who pretends to think so?"

"The head of a family who came to consult me this morning, as one of his sons wishes to demand this

young person in marriage as soon as she comes out of the convent. Well, this father had heard that the young lady was not in the possession of her reason, that she was epileptic, insane, or imbecile."

"Indeed," replied Jacques, who, scarcely recovered from his surprise, began to put himself on guard, "I do not know. How should I know?"

"Then, if you do not know anything, I must find Miette, who will be better informed, and will be willing to give me the information I desire."

Here was a new trouble for Jacques.

"Miette will go to your house, my uncle. There is no need of your going to see her."

"Why should I not? It is not very far."

"She is probably not at home to-day. She had some purchases to make at Riom."

"It is no matter; if I do not find her, I will leave word that she may expect me to-morrow."

"She will make you a call, uncle. I will let her know that you want to see her."

"So you are very much afraid that I shall go to Vignolette?"

"It is for the sake of sparing you useless trouble, uncle."

"You are very good. I rather think that you are afraid I shall find out a secret."

"I? How? Why do you say that?"

"You know very well that no longer ago than last evening Henri discovered that Miette concealed a secret very painful to him, and consequently to me."

"For you—for him? I cannot comprehend it."

"What comedy are you playing? Did you not confess everything to Henri?"

"He told you? I confessed nothing at all."

"You confessed to him that Miette had a lover whom she preferred, and that my son had nothing to do but to retire from the field."

"I confessed that? Never! never! My sister has no other lover. Is it possible that you doubt Miette's uprightness and modesty? A lover at her house when I was not there! If any one but you had said that—"

"Then the person concealed at Vignollette is a woman."

"It cannot be a man; I swear that the thing is impossible, and that it is not true."

"You must, then, be sure of it. You go often to Miette's—"

"I have not put my foot in the house for a month."

"That is strange! Has she forbidden you to go there?"

"I have had no time."

"How is that? You find time to attend all the fairs in the vicinity."

"For my business, not for my pleasure. I am not

going to waste my time any longer; it is the solemn truth."

"You are thinking of getting married?"

"Perhaps so."

"With an heiress?"

"With a person whom I have loved for a long time."

"And who is not an idiot?"

"To love an idiot! How horrible!"

"You are not like the young man who seeks Mademoiselle de Nives for her fortune, and who does not care whether she knows her right hand from her left. You can conceive the uneasiness of the father who has consulted me on this point. He would think his son dishonored if this were certain."

"It would be a mean, base deed, certainly. But who has circulated this report about Mademoiselle de Nives? It must be her step-mother."

"You are acquainted, then, with her step-mother? Come, tell me what you know."

"But I know nothing at all. I only know what every one says, what you have heard a thousand times. The Count de Nives married an adventuress, who drove away and persecuted the child of his first wife. It is even said that this young girl died in a convent."

"Ah! you thought she was dead?"

"I have heard such a report."

"Very well. I can tell you that she is living, and, if my inferences do not mislead me, for she has escaped from the convent, she is now concealed at Vignolette."

"Ah ! she escaped ?"

"Yes, young man, with a lover who has very large feet."

Jacques Ormonde looked involuntarily at his feet, and then at mine, as if to make a comparison that had never entered his mind before. Perhaps until this moment he had never suspected that there could be any imperfection in his *physique*.

I saw plainly that he was foiled, and that if I pushed him a little further he would tell me everything ; but my object was to search out his exact position in regard to the case, not to gain his confidence. I changed the conversation abruptly.

"Tell me about your sister," I said. "Is it true that she is angry with Madame Chantabel ?"

"My aunt has hurt her feelings very much by giving her to understand that she did not look favorably upon her marriage with Henri."

"I know there is a misunderstanding between them, as there is between Henri and you. I hope everything will be made up, and, as you are sure that Miette has formed no other plans—"

"I will take my oath of it."

"Well, I am going to talk with her. Come with me as far as Vignolette."

"I will go half-way, for I have masons here who disarrange all my plans the moment my back is turned."

When we were at a little distance from Vignolette, Jacques begged me to let him return to his work. He seemed afraid to go any farther. I gave him his liberty, but, after watching his progress for a little while, I discovered that he was not returning to Champgousse. He made his way stealthily among the vines, as if to watch the result of my visit to his sister.

I whipped up my horse, and made him redouble his pace. I did not wish Jacques to arrive before me by the narrow footpaths, and to forewarn his sister of my arrival. However, as I must drive around the farm in order to enter it by the carriage-road, I was not certain that with his great limbs and the habits of a hunter who overcomes all obstacles, he had not been beforehand with me, when, without announcing myself, I entered my niece's garden.

She came to me, with a basket of peaches, that she had just gathered, in her hands, and putting them upon a bench, in order to give me a cordial welcome.

"Sit down here," I said ; "I want to talk to you ;" and, in order to sit down, I took up a white-silk umbrella lined with rose-color, that was lying on the

bench. "Is this pretty plaything yours?" I asked. "I did not know you cared for fine things like this."

"No, uncle," she replied, with the frank decision that was at the bottom of her soul and her character. "This plaything is not mine; it belongs to some one who is staying with me."

"And who has run into the house?"

"She will return if you will consent to see her, and hear what she has to say; she wants to talk to you, for last evening I convinced her that this was her wisest course."

"Have you seen your brother to-day?"

"Yes, uncle. I know Henri found out the existence of some secret here. I do not know what he told you, nor what he thinks of it; but I am unwilling to have any secrets with you, and was obliged to tell the person who has trusted hers to me that I would not tell you any falsehoods. You have come to question me, dear uncle; I am ready to answer all your questions."

"Indeed, my child," I resumed, "I will only ask you those to which you can reply without betraying anything. I will not demand the name of the person—I believe I know it—neither will I ask to see her. I am interested solely in what concerns your brother and you personally, for it is of great importance that Jacques should not make you an accomplice in a piece

of folly the consequences of which will be disagreeable if not serious."

"I assure you, uncle, that I do not understand what you are talking about. Jacques has nothing to do with my decision to receive this person and protect her as long as it is in my power."

"You say Jacques has nothing to do with it—and you assure me, Emilie, you have never told me an untruth?"

"Never!" replied Miette, with that all-powerful expression of truth that needs no proof to impress its claims.

"I believe you, dear girl—I believe you!" I cried. "Thus Mademoiselle de—we will not call her by name—came to you, a month since, alone and of her own free-will; that is to say, no one brought her to you, persuading her to come here, and no one helped her to escape from the walls of her prison?"

Before replying, Miette hesitated a moment, as if what I said gave birth to a suspicion that had not before occurred to her.

"The truth that I can swear to," she replied, "is this: One evening last month I was here alone. Jacques had gone to the fair of Artonne. He had been away more than a week, when I heard some one ringing at the gate. I thought at first it was he, but, while getting up to go to the door, I guessed who it must

be ; for I had received a letter announcing a plan, a hope of escape, and asking for an asylum and secrecy. I did not arouse my domestics, who were asleep, but I ran to the door, and found the person I expected. I welcomed her cordially, and led her to the room already prepared for her. Old Nicole was my only confidante, and I am as sure of her fidelity as of my own."

"And this person was alone?"

"No, she was accompanied by Charliette, her nurse, who had planned for a long time and at last succeeded in effecting her escape."

"What has become of this woman?"

"She did not remain here. She is in Riom, where she is living with her husband. I am not much pleased with her appearance, but she comes to see Marie occasionally, to tell her what her step-mother is doing, for she has taken it upon herself to watch her movements."

"Tell me what Jacques did after you had received your friend."

"Jacques returned in two days, but did not see my recluse. I met him on the road, and said to him : 'You must not put your foot in our house, for this would cause a scandal. I have there a friend who cannot see any one. You must sleep at Champgousse. To-morrow I will bring you everything you need, and help you to get settled there. You are anxious to commence building ; begin now ; do not come home for a

month, and keep the most absolute secrecy.' Jacques promised not to try to see my friend, and not to speak of her to any one. He has kept his word."

"You are sure of it?"

"Yes, uncle, even though you should think I am mistaken," replied Miette, firmly; "I know all the levity for which my brother is reproached, but he is blameless where I am concerned. He feels, indeed, that if he came here he would quickly be accused of paying court to my friend, and that I should play a villainous rôle."

"What villainous rôle, my dear? This is the sole point that interests me. What should you think of your situation if Jacques made pretensions to this young woman?"

"Jacques cannot have the least pretension; he is not acquainted with her."

"But suppose—"

"That he has deceived me? It is impossible! it would be unpardonable! This young lady is rich, noble, and has a social position above Jacques. If, to make such an alliance possible, he had tried to become acquainted with her, to win her affection, to profit by her abode with me to compromise her character, I should pass for the accomplice of a base intriguer, or for a ridiculous dupe. Is not this your opinion, uncle?"

In my turn I hesitated to reply. The great Jacques

seemed to me both frivolous enough and positive enough to deceive his sister.

"My darling," I said, embracing her, "no one will ever accuse you of being concerned in any intrigue whatever, and, if there were persons ill-advised enough for that, your uncle and cousin would box their ears."

"But my aunt Chantabell!" replied Miette, with an expression of sorrowful pride. "My aunt is prejudiced against me, and perhaps she has already spread unfavorable reports in regard to me?"

"Your aunt has not heard anything. Forget what she said to you, for she will make amends for her thoughtlessness. I cannot deny that my dear wife is thoughtless; but she is good, and has a high esteem for you."

"She does not love me, uncle; that was plain the last time I saw her, and she has prejudiced Henri's mind against me."

"But am I of no account? I am here, and I love you enough for four. Tell me one thing: do you still love Henri?"

"Yes, I love the Henri of old times; now, I cannot tell—I must make his acquaintance over again. He has changed in form, language, and manners. It will take time to gain a knowledge of his character, but he cannot come to my house for some weeks, neither can I go to yours; you now understand the reason why."

"Well! put off for a few weeks the examination you wish to make, and answer a final question. Do you know well the person to whom you are giving an asylum?"

"Yes, uncle."

"You love her?"

"Very much."

"And you esteem her?"

"I firmly believe that she has never done anything that merits serious disapprobation."

"Has she a good mind?"

"Yes, both mind and intelligence."

"Is she well instructed?"

"As well as one can be in a convent; she reads a great deal now."

"Has she sound common-sense?"

"Much more than the person who has brought her misfortunes upon her, and who still persecutes her."

"Enough! I do not want to know any more at present, neither do I desire to see your friend until I have something important to tell her."

"Ah, uncle!" cried Miette, who was not deficient in penetration—"I guess! You have been consulted; you are commissioned to—"

"I have been consulted, but I am entirely free to act as I intend. I would not enter upon a case, for

anything in the world, where your name would be used in the pleadings ; but there will be no case, you may be sure, and, if there were, I would refuse to plead against one who is your dependent and *protégée*. As it is now a question of compromise, I have the right to give good advice to both parties. Tell your friend that she has done a very imprudent thing in quitting her convent when she would so soon have the full right to leave it of her own free-will ; and let me tell you that, in encouraging her, you have been guilty of a foolish act of which I did not believe you capable."

"No, uncle, I have been deceived by appearances. Marie wrote : 'I am of age, but see no prospect of regaining my liberty. My only resource is in flight, and you are the only person in the world who can give me an asylum. Are you willing to receive me?' I could not refuse. When she arrived, she told me that she should not be of age for several weeks. I was well acquainted with Marie, and knew she was a month younger than I, but did not know the day of her birth. After I found this out, I fully understood that she must be closely concealed, and took all possible precautions. I had succeeded until now. Marie does not go out of the inclosure, and my farmers are reliable and devoted. They do not know her name, have not seen her, and, without being in my confidence,

are distrustful enough to make no reply to any questions that might be asked them."

"Ah, well! my dear girl, redouble your precautions, for at the present time Mademoiselle Marie is still under her guardian's control. She has power to take her home, or force her to return to the convent—between two gendarmes, as they say!"

"I know it, uncle, I know it! therefore I sleep with one eye open. If such a thing should happen—poor Marie! I would follow her; I should be seen conducted through the country by the gendarmes."

"As Jacques would not endure this—nor I, any more than he, if I were there—we should be in fine business! Friendship is a good thing, but I find that your friend has well used, not to say abused, yours."

"She is so unhappy, uncle! If you knew—ah! how I wish she could talk to you, and tell you the story of her life!"

"I do not wish to see her, and I must not. It is impossible for me to be the confidant of her presence here. Remember this would spoil everything, and destroy my power of being useful to you. Now I am going away. I have not seen her, you have not told me her name, I know absolutely nothing. Embrace me, and say to your recluse that she must not leave her umbrellas in your garden."

"Take this basket of peaches, uncle ; my aunt likes them."

"No ! Your peaches, though superb, are less velvety and fresh than you are ; and, as I shall not speak at home of having seen you, I do not wish to carry anything away. Allow me only to say to Henri that you will consent to renew your acquaintance with him next month ?"

"You are going to tell him, then, that you have seen me ?"

"Yes, him alone, but he will not know anything of your secret."

"Then, dear uncle, tell him—tell him—tell him nothing ; learn, before all else, what my aunt has against me. As long as she feels unkindly toward me, I cannot think of anything."

VII.

I RESOLVED to confide nothing of what I had learned to Henri. I must, however, remove his suspicions of Miette, and console him. I knew it was useless to trust him, for he was wounded to the depths of his heart, and I feared to see him, both by his conduct and the position he assumed, render a marriage impossible, in which, I thought, the happiness of his life

was bound up. I returned about three oclock, and found no one at home. My wife and son had gone to the manor of Percemont, and I went there to join them.

The plaything pleased Henri decidedly, and his mother was trying to persuade him, under the pretense of a study, to fit up a comfortable suite of apartments suitable for a bachelor. I did not agree with them. In my opinion, the manor should be left exactly as it was, the only change advisable being to clean and repair the room that the old Coras de Percemont had occupied. "Henri," said I, "whether he marries his cousin Emilie or not, will marry some one in two or three years. Who knows if he will go to live with his wife or remain with us? In the latter case, I suppose his wife will wish to live in the tower; great expense must then be incurred to prepare it for housekeeping and a family. All that you do at present will be of no use, and will perhaps have to be done over again; do not be in a hurry to throw away money to no purpose."

Henri yielded to my judgment. His mother blamed him for always giving up to me, and never carrying out any ideas that she suggested. "You just promised me," she said, "that you would not think of marrying before you were thirty years old."

After scolding him until she was tired, she left us

alone, and I hastened to say to Henri: "I have just been to see Miette. I was sure of it! The person whose presence perplexed you so much at her house last evening was a woman."

"You are sure, father? Why, then, did she conceal her?"

"It is a nun from the convent of Riom, whom the physician has ordered to be sent into the country for a while. You know these nuns are cloistered, and must not see any one belonging to the outside world. Whenever a visitor arrives, Miette has promised to give her warning, so that she may take herself out of the way. She has also received instructions not to reveal to any one the presence of this nun under her roof, for the rule of the order requires her to live and die in a convent. The bishop, seeing the urgency of the case, granted a dispensation of two months, upon condition that the matter should be kept quiet. I intrust the secret to you, and beg you to say nothing to your mother in regard to it. Miette, very much attached to this nun, who was like a mother to her at the convent, spends her whole time in taking care of her, waiting upon her, and keeping her concealed. As usual, Miette, with the heart of an angel, acts the part of a Sister of Charity."

"What must she think of me for bringing such an accusation against her? Did you tell her what I said?"

"I was not so foolish. She would not pardon you very easily ; but tears are in your eyes ! Tell me frankly if Emilie is not dearer to you than you are willing to own ?"

"Father," said Henri, "I feel inclined to weep and to laugh also."

"Laugh and weep as much as you like, but speak !"

"That is difficult. I cannot tell you how I feel when my own mind is not clear to myself. I know that Emilie is an angel—better still, she is a saint ; for, if she has the innocence and candor attributed to celestial beings, she has also the merit of a generous and courageous soul that surmounts all trials. It is a glory to be loved by her, a supreme felicity to have her for a wife. You see, I know what she is worth ; but am I good for anything ? Am I worthy of such a wife ? What have I done to deserve her ? On the contrary, I have, not without stain, passed through an experience of life of which she has not the least idea, and from which I was compelled to drive away her image to prevent it from making me ashamed of my pleasures. And now I return to her deteriorated and sorrowful. A man should marry at eighteen, father, in the fervor of faith in himself and in the pride of holy innocence. He would then feel himself the equal of his companion, and be sure of meriting her respect. . . . Yes, conjugal love is that austere and sacred thing

concerning which it may be said, if it is not all in all, it is nothing. Well ! I did not understand this until lately, and, when my senses drew me elsewhere, I did not dream that my esteem and respect for Emilie would be lessened. I have since seen my mistake. My worship has grown cold ; I am convinced that I never loved her as I ought, since I could forget her. I was fearful of her and of myself : I thought her too much my superior, morally speaking, to receive me with pleasure, and to give herself to me with enthusiasm ; I saw in marriage a chain of a frightful seriousness. My imagination pictured other types than that of this young girl, who is too perfect for me. I lost the taste for simplicity and love for the right path ; I put too many artificial flowers in my garden of love. I cannot speak to Emilie, I dare not look at her. I shall never know how to gain her love. Do you wish me to tell you everything — to confess something absolutely shameful ? Yesterday, when I believed her unfaithful, at first my blood ran cold, and then suddenly I became furious. Jealousy tormented me, and I did not close my eyes for the whole night. If she had been near me, I should have insulted, perhaps beaten her ! I was madly in love with her even when believing her unfaithful. I had the greatest trouble possible to prevent myself from going to see her notwithstanding her prohibition and yours. Now you make

plain to me that I have been a madman and a fool, show me Emilie's image, with its immaculate aureole, and behold me cast down and repentant, but uncertain and fearful. I cannot tell whether I love her or not ! ”

“ That will do, that will do,” I replied ; “ now I understand everything ! These things must happen. There is a period of life when fathers with the best intentions are forced to abandon their sons to fate, very happy if they are restored in no worse condition than you are. Accept the past which you cannot change, and do not aggravate its influence by too serious reflections. You have made a voyage where you have been forced to feed on condiments, and now our fruits and milk-diet seem insipid to your taste. You are no longer a Virgilian shepherd. Have patience—these simple pleasures will return. Man is modified according to his sphere ; you will appreciate more quickly than you imagine the conditions of true happiness. Forget for a little while the question of marriage. Emilie does not seem disposed to recall it to your mind. She says you are so changed that she does not feel acquainted with you any longer, and her mind, I plainly see, has no fixed plan in regard to you. You are both absolutely free to recommence the romance of your youth, or to suffer it to be effaced in the rosy clouds of the past.”

I am not easily alarmed, neither am I heedless of

consequences. I saw plainly that in this, as in everything else, happiness is transitory and security chimerical. I expected that the day which restored my son to me would be one of the happiest of my life. I was so glad to see him once more, and had such happy dreams when expecting him ! In spite of the faults which he freely confessed, and took little pains to conceal in his letters, he had worked hard, and was at the commencement of a career promising a brilliant future. He was intelligent, handsome, good, rich, and as reasonable as could be expected from his age and situation. We had near at hand the best girl in the country, rich also, good, beautiful as an angel, and exceptionally intellectual. They loved each other, and had been betrothed from childhood. I expected to see them meet joyfully, and talk of marriage immediately—and already a strange coolness had sprung up between them. My wife, whom I believed amenable to reason, at least on this subject, was diligently working to set them at variance. Miette, through the kindness of her heart, was involved in a questionable adventure. Jacques was carrying on an amorous intrigue which would compromise or bring trouble to his sister ; and, worst of all, Henri, troubled and tormented between love and caprice, did not sleep the first night passed under the paternal roof, and was evidently suffering from an indefinable mental condition beyond my power to cure.

My day of happiness was not unclouded, and, while pretending to smile at these trifling matters, I felt strongly the effects of the reaction.

VIII.

THE evening passed very cheerfully ; many relatives and friends dined with us. Henri was a general favorite, and every one congratulated me on the possession of such a son. He received several invitations, but only accepted those where I could go with him. He had been away so long, he said, that he was determined not to lose sight of me during the vacation.

We accepted for the next day an invitation to a hunting-party from one of our cousins who lived so far off that we were obliged to be absent from home two days. Jacques Ormonde promised to join the party, but he was not there. We scarcely thought of his absence, the hunting and the entertainment were so animated and enjoyable ; but I noticed the evident care in avoiding us. It was very difficult for Jacques to keep a secret, therefore I inferred that he had one, and dreaded my scrutiny. We staid a day longer than we intended, and did not return until Monday afternoon.

The first thing that attracted my attention, as I bade my wife good-day, was a pretty little girl six or seven years old, full of smiles and play, who clung to her skirts and said to me in a defiant tone :

“ Are you Bébelle’s husband ? ”

“ Who is Bébelle ? and whose is this pretty child ? ”

“ It is Mademoiselle Léonie de Nives,” replied my wife, taking her in her arms ; “ she heard me called Madame Chantabel, and she finds it shorter and prettier to call me Bébelle. Oh ! we are already great friends—is it not so, Ninie ? We get along famously together.”

“ But how came you to be acquainted with her ? ” I demanded.

My wife explained the matter, while the child left us to play in the garden. Madame de Nives came the evening before to talk with me, and my wife had gained confidence enough to receive her to the best of her ability. The exquisite toilet and brilliant equipage of the countess had turned her head. Madame did her best to be agreeable and fascinating to the wife of the lawyer whom she wished to secure for her cause. She consented to let her horses stand in the stable for two hours. She walked in the garden, and even ascended the great tower of which Madame Chantabel was proud to do the honors. She admired the locality, the gar-

den, the house, the birds, and promised a pair of real Dutch canaries for the aviary. She deigned to accept a collation of fruit and cake that was served for her ; declared that no grapes or pears at Nives bore any comparison with ours ; even asked the recipe for the cake. She went away, saying she should return the next day.

She did return, as she said, with her daughter, expecting to find me at home, as I had promised to be ; but I was never in season. This poor countess had waited for me more than an hour ; then, having business at Riom, she had conferred upon my house the distinguished honor of leaving her little girl there, in my wife's arms, and she was now expected every minute. "I hope, M. Chantabel," said my wife, as she finished the story, "that you will have your clothes brushed, for they are covered with dust, and change your cravat, for it is very much soiled." I remarked that she was richly dressed to receive her new friend.

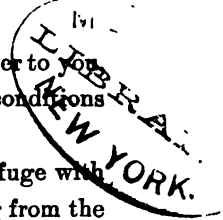
A little while after, Madame de Nives arrived, and my wife hastened to meet her, leading the little one by the hand. The countess announced to me that she was on her way to Paris ; some one had written her that her step-daughter had been seen entering an hotel in the Faubourg St.-Germain, leaning on the arm of a young man very tall and very blond. "The person who gives me this information," she added, "thinks

that Marie is still there ; at any rate I shall know where she went after leaving this hotel, which is not otherwise designated. People are so afraid of being compromised, or finding themselves implicated in some scandal ! I must go myself to find out the truth. I shall act energetically, take Marie by surprise, oblige her to make a statement of her misconduct, and bring her back to replace her triumphantly in the convent."

"You speak boldly ! Then can you hope for a reconciliation, for concessions on her part ? I have told you, and I repeat it, that misconduct does not involve deprivation of civil rights."

"When I possess her secret, I will bring her to you. M. Chantabel, and you shall lay down the conditions of my silence."

If I had been sure that, before taking refuge with Emilie, Mademoiselle de Nives, after escaping from the convent, had not been seen in Paris with Jacques, either for her own pleasure or for advice in regard to her position, I should have hastened the departure of the countess. The time she would lose in her useless search for Mademoiselle Marie would be just so much gained for the inhabitants of Vignollette ; but, if this journey took place without Emilie's knowledge, Madame de Nives could trace out the fugitive, and, with the aid of the police, discover the truth. I advised once more patience and prudence. Madame de Nives



was, however, determined to have her own way, and took leave of me, saying that to surprise Marie in open criminality was her surest means of safety. Whatever she might say, I saw plainly that she had taken other advice than mine, and had easily found persons disposed to gratify her passion and enter into her views. Her cause became more and more disagreeable to me, and I felt strongly impelled to have nothing to do with it.

I accompanied her only as far as the garden. Another client was waiting for me, and I was occupied with him until dinner-time. What was my surprise when, upon entering the dining-room, I saw the young Léonie de Nives seated in a high chair, that had done service in Henri's childhood, and my wife in the act of tying a napkin around her neck !

Madame de Nives had confided to Madame Chantabel, on the previous evening, all that she had intrusted to me as a profound secret. Women have a marvelous facility in becoming intimate, when hatred on one side and curiosity on the other find the savory aliment of a scandal to confide and to listen to. Madame Chantabel was, then, thoroughly versed in all the details of the case, and my astonishment amused her very much. As she could not enter into any explanation before the child, she simply said to Henri and me that "her mamma would return in the evening."

"I asked her to stay and dine with us," said my wife, "but, as she intends to start for Paris this evening or to-morrow morning, she has too much to do at Riom, and begged me to keep her little one until she came for her."

Madame de Nives did not return in the evening. My wife did not appear to be much astonished, and had a little bed arranged near her own for her young guest. After undressing Mademoiselle Ninie, and sitting by her until she went to sleep, she came back to explain the mystery.

Madame de Nives had been obliged to take the five-o'clock train for Riom ; she was now on her way to Paris. I ought to know that not a moment should be lost in such an important affair as that which now engrossed her attention. Madame de Nives had dreaded the tears of her little daughter, whom she could not take with her, and had accepted her offer to keep her until evening. Her nurse would have come with the carriage to take her to Nives, but she had shown much anxiety on account of this nurse, having discovered on that very day that she was carrying on an intrigue at Riom. "The servants of this poor lady," my wife said, "were not as faithful as they should be. Domestic arrangements had not been prosperous in her chateau since her husband's death. The old servants took the side of the elder daughter. She was obliged to

turn them out of the house, but they left behind their evil influence and their wicked insinuations ; it was useless to take these servants to Paris : at the least discontent they became insolent, and talked to Ninie about her sister Marie, driven away and shut up in a convent on her account. All this irritated the child, and during the last absence of the countess many things were said to the little girl that made her unhappy and disobedient when her mother returned. It appears, also, that Madame de Nives's neighbors are not on good terms with her. She has neither relatives nor friends ; she is truly an object of pity. While listening to her grievances, which aroused my sympathy, the idea came into my head of proposing to take care of the little one. 'If the nurse has behaved improperly, you cannot trust the child to her any longer. Give her to me ; you know who I am, and with what indulgence I brought up my son and the other two dear ones I lost. You say that you will be absent but a week at the most. What is it for us to take care of a child for a week ? It will be a pleasure to me. Trust me to dismiss your bad nurse when she comes back, and to find another for whom I will be responsible as for myself.' She was inclined to accept my offer, but dared not on your account ; she said :

"My child is noisy, and will annoy M. Chantabel."

"Nonsense !" I replied ; "you do not know him !

He is a patriarch! He is good as bread, and adores children.' At last I urged her so much that she left me her darling, who is a love of a child. The poor woman was so touched that she wept and embraced me when she bade me good-by."

"Is it possible, wife, you have been embraced by a countess! That is the reason why I find on your face a more noble expression than usual."

"You are making fun of me! It is insufferable! It is of no use to try any longer to talk reasonably with you, M. Chantabel; you are—"

"Insufferable, you said."

"No; you are the best of men, you cannot blame me for having received a poor child who needs to be taken care of and watched over during her mother's absence."

"God keep me from it!—so much the more as you pay me compliments that I will not give back with reproaches. The child does not make me angry: a child never annoys me. Keep her as long as you please; but let me tell you that your countess is a regular knave."

"How disrespectful you speak of the Countess de Nives! What manners you have sometimes, M. Chantabel!"

"Yes, I have the bad manners and the bad taste to think that a reasonable mother does not trust her child,

even for a week, to a person whom she has known only since last evening, and that, if she has among all her former connections neither a devoted relative, nor a sincere friend, nor a faithful servant, it must be her own fault."

"You are right. I would not have trusted Henri to strangers in this way; but I am not unknown to Madame de Nives. She has heard me spoken of often enough to know that I have always been a good mother and an irreproachable wife."

"I shall not say anything to the contrary; but this sudden confidence astonishes me none the less."

"There are exceptional circumstances; and you ought to know that the future of the child depends upon the result of her mother's visit to Paris."

"She told you, then—"

"Everything."

"She did wrong."

"I promised to keep the secret."

"God grant that you may keep your word! for I warn you that, if your new friend brings reproach upon the reputation of her step-daughter, she is ruined."

"Oh, no! This step-daughter is a wretched being who—"

"You do not know her! Keep the epithets that will be appropriate for the time when we find out whether she is a victim or a fiend."

IX.

THE next day, Mademoiselle Ninie's nurse not having appeared, my wife found an excellent servant-girl to take her place, whose parents lived near, and with whom we were well acquainted. The little girl seemed to be very happy with us.

I was curious to know her feelings in regard to her half-sister. One morning I saw her alone in the garden ; my wife, busy with her work, was sitting at one of the lower windows, and watching the little girl at her play. I went into the garden, took the child by the hand, and led her to see some rabbits in a little inclosure where they were kept. When she had admired them for some time, I took her on my knee, and began to talk to her.

"You must have, at Nives," I said, "much more beautiful rabbits than these?"

"No, there are no rabbits at all. There are only hens, dogs, and cats ; but mamma is not willing to let me play with them for fear that I shall soil or tear my clothes, and this makes me angry, for I am very fond of animals. Mamma scolds at me for loving them, because she is stingy."

"Stingy ! What does that word mean?"

"Ah, bless me ! I don't know. The servants call her so, because she is always scolding them."

"That is a bad word. You must never repeat words that you do not know the meaning of. I am sure your mamma loves you very much, and that she is very good to you."

"She is not good at all. She whips me and strikes me, and I never have a good time, excepting when she has gone away."

"Have you any brothers and sisters ?"

"I have a grown-up sister who is very good. I should like to live with her always."

"Always ! Do you not see her often ?"

"No ; she is in prison in a convent. I saw her—I mean I saw her portrait. I think I never saw her."

"Then how do you know that she is good ?"

"My nurse and the old gardener's wife told me that she was put in prison on that account."

"What ! put in prison because she is good ?"

"So it seems. Therefore, when mamma tells me to be good, I answer : 'No ; you would make me go to prison in the same way !' I am very glad she brought me to your house. I hope you will let me stay here always."

Then, without waiting for my reply, Mademoiselle Ninie, whom I had hard work to hold, ran after the rabbits faster than ever. I saw a child already the

victim of misfortune, and a wanderer from the right path. I no longer doubted that her mother was both avaricious and wicked. It was even possible that she saw in her daughter only a pretext for contesting Marie's inheritance with greater avidity. She had not even the resource of hypocrisy, the power of making dupes ; for she was thoroughly detested ; and her servants had disturbed, if not irretrievably injured, the moral sense of poor Ninie.

I looked with painful emotion upon this bewitching child, clothed in all the physical beauty of her happy age, and thought that there was already a gnawing worm in the heart of this rose. I watched her closely to discover the ruling impulses of her character : they were good and tender. She ran after the rabbits in order to caress them, and, when she had succeeded in catching one, she covered it with kisses, and tried to swaddle it in her handkerchief, to make a baby of it. As the animal was unmanageable, and threatened to scratch her pretty face, I took him away gently, without opposition on her part, and gave her a tame dove, which made her wild with delight. At first she squeezed it very closely, but when I made her understand that she must let it go free in order to have the pleasure of seeing it come back and follow her of its own accord, she listened to me willingly, and handled it gently ; but there was an ardor in her caresses

that revealed a soul full of unrequited love and repressed sensibility.

The next day, St.-Hyacinth's-day, was my birthday, and also the festival-day of our village. Two or three dozen cousins and nephews arrived with their wives and children to pass the holiday with us. They went to participate in the rural *fête*, while my wife, up with the dawn, prepared a Homeric feast. I was absorbed as usual with a crowd of clients—prosperous peasants or humble citizens—who took advantage of the *fête* to consult me, and deprived me of the pleasure of being present at the festival.

I endured the long and confused explanations of these worthy persons until the first bell rang for dinner. Then I resolutely put them out-of-doors, not without a struggle on the stairway against their references and repetitions. When I passed into the drawing-room, after shutting the door in their faces, I met with an agreeable surprise. Emilie Ormonde was waiting for me, with a large bouquet of magnificent roses in her hand. The dear child threw herself into my arms, wishing me a pleasant birthday, with happiness, good-fortune, and health.

“This,” I said, pressing her to my heart, “is a great enjoyment which I did not expect. Have you been here long, my dear niece?”

“I have just arrived, uncle, and I am going away

immediately. You must excuse me from dining with you as on other years ; but you know why I cannot. Marie is imprudent ; she is tired of being shut up. The poor child has been a prisoner so long ! Would you believe that this morning she took it into her head to disguise herself as a peasant to come to the *fête* ? She said no one knew her face, and she wanted to accompany me as a servant. The only way I could dissuade her from her purpose was by promising to be gone but an hour. I could not let the day pass without bringing you the Vignollette roses, nor without telling you to-day, as always, that you and Jacques are the two persons whom I love the best in the world."

"And your aunt ?"

"I have not seen her. I will pay my respects to her as I go out."

"How will you explain the reason why you do not stay ?"

"She will not care to have me stay, uncle."

"And if I let you go, shall you imagine that I do not love you any longer ?"

"Oh ! it is different with you ! And then you know I have a child to take care of."

"An unreasonable child, I am sure of it ! Do you know that her step-mother was here two days ago ?"

"Yes ; I knew also that she left her little daughter with you."

"Who told you so?"

"Old Nicole's daughter, who came yesterday to bring back some baskets you had lent us. She saw the child, and they told her that the mother had gone to Paris. Is it true?"

"It is true, and Mademoiselle Marie runs a great risk of being discovered, if, after escaping from the convent, she were seen in Paris before coming to your house."

"She was there, uncle; I know it now. She was obliged to purchase under-clothing and dresses, and especially to seek counsel in her affairs, concerning which she had always been kept in entire ignorance."

"She was in Paris—alone?"

"No, with her nurse, the one who helped her to escape. This woman is devoted to her, and yet I am afraid of her; she does not understand the necessity of being prudent; she suspects nothing, and, when she comes to see Marie, I do not dare to leave her alone in the house with her."

"But where is Jacques all this time?"

"He must be at the dance, and doubtless he will come and dine with you."

"That is right! Go, then, if you must. I hope that you will make ample amends to me when you are no more the guardian slave of your beautiful friend. Have you seen Henri?"

"No; I have seen and wish to see no one but you. Adieu until we meet again, dear uncle!"

The second bell rang for dinner as my niece went away through the farm-yard, where she had left her cariole in charge of a domestic. Henri, who came through the garden, did not see her. The crowd of nephews, cousins, second-cousins, and grand-nephews, arrived also, and at last Jacques Ormonde, red as a peony from having danced until the last minute. The dinner was not very tedious for a family repast in the country; it was well known that I did not like to sit long at table. It was served promptly, and did not allow the guests to go to sleep while they were eating. As soon as it was finished, feeling the need of breathing the out-door air, after the confinement my clients had imposed upon me in the morning, I proposed to go and take coffee at Father Rosier's, who kept a rustic establishment in the village. We could see the dances and diversions from his garden. My proposition was enthusiastically welcomed by my young nieces and cousins. We set off laughing, shouting, frisking about, and singing. The village was only half a mile from the house, taking the paths through my meadow-lands.

Our boisterous arrival made all the young people come out of the wine-shops. They were getting ready to light the signal-light, for it was dark. They called

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the fiddlers scattered around in the ale-houses. The young folks who came with me cared little for taking coffee ; they wished to dance. The *personnel* of the *fête* brightened up very much. The dance, abandoned for a time, was reorganized, as is usually the case when hunger is appeased and the evening begins.

During this quarter of an hour of impatient expectation and joyful disorder, I chanced to be alone for a few minutes on Father Rosier's terrace. This terrace was a little garden on the declivity of a hill planted with hazel-nut trees, and carried from the lowest point of the rock about six feet perpendicular above the level of the place appropriated for dancing. It was much the prettiest place for getting a view of the whole effect of the *fête*. Three blue lanterns concealed in the foliage produced the appearance of moonlight, and made it easy for different persons to recognize each other. The illumination had, however, not commenced, and I was waiting in the darkness until my turn came to be served, when I perceived some one approaching with a stealthy step, who touched me lightly on the shoulder.

"Don't say a word, uncle ; it is I, Emilie."

"What are you doing here, dear child ? I thought you had gone home."

"I have been home—and come back, uncle. Are we alone here ?"

"Yes, just this moment; but speak low."

"Yes, certainly! I must tell you that I did not find Marie at Vignollette. Nicole told me that Charliette came in my absence, and that they went out together."

"Well! you think they are here?"

"Yes, I think so; and I am looking for them."

"In this way, entirely alone among these peasants filled with wine, many of whom are not acquainted with you, for they come here from all parts of the country?"

"I am not afraid of anything, uncle. There are enough who are acquainted with me to protect me in case of need. Besides, Jacques will be here, and I thought you would take care of me."

"Then do not leave me, and let your madcap friend follow her own adventures. It is not right that, to save a person who does not wish to be saved, you should expose yourself to insult. Remain with me. I will not allow you to take care of Mademoiselle Marie. Jacques is there to take care of her in your place and in his own way."

"Jacques does not know her, uncle. I assure you—"

I interrupted Miette by making a sign for her to observe a couple moving stealthily along the rock below us in the thick shade that the hazel-nut trees

threw upon the lower ground-plot. I recognized Jacques's voice. We remained motionless, listening, and heard the following dialogue :

"No ; I will not go back yet. I want to dance the *bourrée* with you. It is dark ; and, besides, no one knows me."

"They will soon light up, and every one will notice you."

"Why ?"

"You ask the reason ? Do you believe there is another peasant-girl here as fair, as slender, and as pretty as you are ?"

"You are flattering me. I will tell Miette."

"You need not boast of my acquaintance !"

"I know it is not worth speaking of."

"Cruel creature ! Come, call Charliette, and go home with her."

"It is you who are cruel ! How can you refuse me this little enjoyment ?"

"My uncle is here, and you know that he is the advocate of your step-mother."

"That makes no difference to me ; he will be mine if I wish. When he knows me, he will be on my side. You said so yourself. Come, Jacques, here are the bagpipes coming. I must dance."

"It is absolute madness !"

"Oh, to dance the *bourrée* as in my childhood !

To have been ten years in a dungeon, to escape from the icy coldness of death, to feel myself alive, and to dance the *bourrée* ! Jacques, my good Jacques, I have set my heart upon it ! ”

The noisy music of the bagpipes interrupted the conversation or prevented us from hearing it. The beacon was at last lighted, and Father Rosier’s garden was also illuminated. I saw all my guests ; those who were not dancing were taking the coffee I had ordered, while the young men, scattered over the square, were inviting their partners for the dance.

I moved a few steps out of the way with Emilie, in such a manner as to prolong my *tête-à-tête* with her, without ceasing to observe what was taking place upon the green. When the beacon-light blazed up, we saw very distinctly the great Jacques bounding in the dance and lifting in his arms a slender and pretty peasant-girl, very gracefully attired.

“ It is indeed she ! ” said Emilie, in consternation ; “ it is Marie, disguised ! ”

“ You begin to think that she is a little acquainted with your brother ? ”

“ I was mistaken, uncle—ah ! very much mistaken ! He has done wrong.”

“ And now what are you going to do ? ”

“ Wait until her fancy is gratified, approach her, speak to her gently as to a domestic in my service,

and take her home before she has attracted too much attention."

"Wait until I look at her."

"Do you think she is pretty, uncle?"

"Yes, indeed; very pretty, and she dances admirably."

"Look at her critically, uncle; you will see that she is a child, utterly unconscious of what she is doing. I am certain that she has not the least idea of making trouble for me or any one else. It is possible that she has become acquainted with Jacques without my knowledge; that he has helped her to escape, accompanied her to Paris, as you think, brought her even to my door, and seen her secretly since; that they love each other, are betrothed, and have deceived me to avoid the obstacle of my conscientious scruples."

"It is certain now."

"Very well, uncle, it matters little; Marie is still pure, and more ignorant than I am; for I know from what danger a girl twenty-two years old must be kept, while she—is always like a child of twelve! She learned nothing in the convent of those things she needs most to know at the present time. I find her exactly where I left her at the convent of Riom, loving movement, noise, freedom, and dancing, but not suspecting that she can become blameworthy, and incapable of permitting any impropriety in Jacques."

"However, my dear Miette, when Mademoiselle de Nives was at the convent of Riom, and only fourteen or fifteen years old, she had a lover who wrote her letters badly spelled, and this lover was Jacques."

"No, uncle, this lover—must I tell you?—he was entirely innocent."

"Tell me everything."

"Well, this lover was your son—it was Henri."

"Are you in earnest?"

"Yes, I saw the letters, and recognized the writing. Henri was then in college, the grounds of which were only separated by a wall from the convent; the students threw balls over the walls, and concealed letters in them, declarations of love, of course, in prose or verse, with full signatures, and addressed at random to Louise, Charlotte, Marie. Henri was delighted with this sport, and excelled in writing in the style of a shoemaker, with a corresponding orthography. He signed his name *Jaquet*, and addressed his burlesque love-letters to Marie, who made fun of them. He knew her given name, for he often heard it called out in our garden; but did not take the trouble to find out whether she was pretty or not, for neither at this time nor since has he ever seen her face. She told me the whole story."

"You are sure that he never saw her? I have my doubts—look, Miette, look!"

The *bourrée* was finished ; they were going to commence it again, and, at the moment when Jacques was about to lead out his partner, Henri, addressing her, invited her for the next dance. She accepted, regardless of Jacques's visible disapprobation. She took my son's arm, and danced with him, manifesting as much enjoyment as when dancing with my nephew.

"Indeed ! what does this prove ?" said the good Emilie, without any appearance of vexation. "Henri has noticed this pretty girl, and said to himself that, since Jacques has danced with her, he could also invite her. Permit me, uncle, to go near her, for she begins to make a sensation, and every one will be asking her to dance. I must take her away. Charliette is here—I see her ; but she spoils her, and will allow her to remain long enough to attract too much attention."

"Go, then ; but all this annoys me excessively. This girl is possessed of the devil ! She will cause you a thousand cares, will certainly injure your reputation. Meantime, she dances with Henri, while, excepting for her presence under your roof, he would have renewed the tender and serious pledge of your mutual affection, and to-day he would have opened the ball with his *fiancée*, instead of dancing with a fair unknown, whose beautiful eyes may perhaps arouse his passionate admiration, but will not be able to gain a permanent hold upon his heart."

"Who knows?" said Miette, with a profound expression of sorrowful resignation.

"Who knows?" I exclaimed. "I know that I will not suffer the least coquetry between your *fiancé* and your brother's betrothed!"

"Uncle, do not injure her!" quickly replied the generous girl. "Whatever happens, I have promised to devote myself to her service, both as a sister and a mother. I will keep my word."

An unexpected incident interrupted us. Jacques Ormonde, seeing Mademoiselle de Nives wild with excitement, and regardless of consequences, contrived a plan for interrupting the ball. He climbed up to the beacon-light, as if he were going to light his cigar, and put it out, apparently without intention, plunging the assembly into darkness. As he descended, he pretended to laugh loudly at the accident, and was lost in the slight tumult it produced. There were a few moments of astonishment and disorder. Some continued to dance, feigning to mistake their partners; others were honestly looking for theirs. Some modest girls, frightened, sought the protection of their parents; others, more bold, laughed and shouted as loud as they could. I descended from the terrace with Miette; at the moment when the light was rekindled, we saw Jacques, wandering, disappointed, looking around among the different groups; Henri and Mademoiselle

de Nives had disappeared, either with or without Charliette.

I saw then that Miette still loved Henri, for great tears glistened for a minute on her cheeks. She tried to conceal them, and, turning toward me, "We must," she said, "prevent Jacques from making any further search. He cannot conceal his feelings, and his anxiety will be noticed."

"Never fear," I replied, "Jacques knows very well how to keep his own counsel ; you cannot doubt it any longer. He will take good care, if he is jealous, not to pick a quarrel with Henri, for this would betray and acknowledge everything. If Mademoiselle de Nives has chosen Henri for her attendant, and he takes her back to Vignollette, you must not let them see that you are uneasy or jealous."

"Certainly not, uncle, I am neither ; but—"

"But here is Jacques, who sees you, and is coming toward us. It is not the time for explanations ; appear to be ignorant of everything. Presently I will make him confess."

"I did not expect the pleasure of seeing you," said Jacques to Emilie ; "you told me you were not coming to the *fête*."

"I have just come," replied Miette. "I had something to say to my uncle. I knew that he would be here this evening."

"And you have seen—only him?" said Jacques, almost distracted.

"Only him? Indeed, I have seen a great many people."

"I thought you were looking for some one?"

"I was looking for no one but my uncle, and you see plainly that I have found him. What is the matter with you, and why do you look so troubled?"

Jacques saw that he had betrayed himself, and hastened to reply with a forced air of gayety :

"I am not troubled about anything! I am looking for Henri, that he may be my *vis-à-vis* in the dance—with you, if you wish."

"Thanks, I am going away. My cariole is waiting for me yonder under the pines. I beg you to tell my old Pierre to put the bridle on the mare. I will follow you."

"Why do you go immediately?" I asked my niece, as soon as Jacques had started off. "Henri is here, without doubt, and, if you desire, will dance with you."

"Uncle, Henri has gone with Marie; they are on their way to Vignollette."

"It is possible—everything is possible; but, upon reflection, it is very improbable; you said they did not know each other? Do you now think your *protégée* so foolish and imprudent as to have made Henri her *con-dant*?"

"I know nothing about the matter, my dear uncle ; I do not understand her any longer !"

"She is coquettish and frivolous, that is plain ; however—"

"They were talking with much earnestness during the *bourrée*, and yesterday Marie wrote a letter which she intrusted to the letter-carrier with great secrecy."

"You suppose—what ?"

"She has a great desire to see you and ask your advice. I was obliged to tell her of your refusal. She then questioned me more than she had ever done before about Henri, his character, and the influence he possessed over you. I should not be surprised if she had commissioned him to ask you for an interview."

"If she wrote to him yesterday, he would have spoken to me to-day. I believe you are mistaken ; whatever it is, we shall see very soon. If she has taken him for an intermediate agent, he will tell me this evening. Now, what are you going to do ?"

"Return home quietly, at a slow pace. As Marie is probably going home on foot, I want to give her time to return to Vignollette, take off her disguise, and go to bed without telling me anything, if she pleases. You understand, uncle ? If she confesses her inconsiderate act, I shall have a right to scold at her and ask her questions. If she wants to conceal it from me, I cannot reproach her without making her angry and

humiliating her very much. Remember she is under my roof, and has no other asylum ; if I offend her, she will leave me, and where then would she go ? To Charliette's, whom I believe capable of any crime ? No, she must not quit me, for she would compromise herself, and give her step-mother the means of destroying her reputation !”

“In this, as in everything, you are as wise as you are generous, my dear Emilie. Say nothing to her, if she is silly enough to wish to deceive you ; but I will speak to Jacques ! Never mind ! he will not dream that you heard his conversation with the damsel.”

We arrived just at this time under the pines where, for want of room in the inn, a number of horses were tied to the trees. Jacques had not troubled himself much in delivering his sister's message to the old servant. He was searching in all directions, looking always for *Mademoiselle de Nives*, and finding it very difficult to obtain information in any other way than by his eyes, which were of little use to him in the thick shade of the pine-grove. Obligated to come at my call, he helped me in seeing Emilie safely started for home.

Then, taking his arm, I led him to an unfrequented path, and said :

“Let us see, young man, what you intend to do, and what will be the end of this fine intrigue.”

In three words I convinced him that I knew everything, and that it was perfectly useless to deny it.

He drew a long breath, and replied :

“O uncle! you confound me ; but you release me from torture, and, excepting for the penalty of being severely scolded, I am delighted at the opportunity of telling you the truth.”

X.

“I WAS in love with Mademoiselle de Nives,” said Jacques, “when she was in the convent at Riom. I had been out of college for a long time, though Henri was still there, and was intending to go to Paris to commence my law-studies. I was passing my vacation at our town-house, and, from one of the dormer-windows of the granary, frequently saw Mademoiselle de Nives standing at the window of her cell looking out upon the convent-garden. It is true, she was but fourteen years old ; but she was already beautiful as an angel ; and, at the age I had then reached, admiration for beauty may rightly be called love. But I was too little accustomed to persons of her condition to think of making a declaration of my passion, and if by chance she turned her head toward me I quickly hid where she could not see me.

"One Sunday Henri, who came to pay me a visit, not finding me in the house, took it into his head to look for me in the granary, where he discovered me absorbed in reverie, and made fun of me. I hurried him from the room in great haste, lest he should see the beautiful charmer who occupied my thoughts. As, however, he persisted in teasing me with epigrams, I confessed that I was in love with a certain Marie in the convent. The malicious *gamin*, for the sake of fun, wrote ridiculous letters to her under the signature of 'Jacques,' and she imprudently made fun of them with her companions. They laughed too loud, and the nuns, who kept watch, seized the balls in which were concealed the love-letters thrown over the college-wall. Madame de Nives was informed of the grave offense. She used it as a pretext for transferring Marie to the convent of Clermont, where she passed a most unhappy youth.

"She will tell you herself what she suffered, uncle ; for she has set her heart upon seeing you and asking your advice and protection. You must, indeed, listen to her. During this time I forgot her, willing or not ; for I was in Paris, and my childish dreams gave place to more serious realities. However, I learned how much the poor girl was to be pitied for my fault and Henri's. He knew nothing about it, as Miette talked only to me, and sometimes she showed

me her friend's letters, which gave me great pain ; but what could I do to repair the wrong ? I was not an eligible party for her, and could not demand her hand in marriage ; besides, the countess did not wish her to be married. She was determined to force her to become a nun, pretending that her step-daughter wished to devote herself to a religious life and rejected the idea of marriage.

"Chance alone could bring about the events that followed. I found myself thoughtlessly involved in a romance, and obliged to accept the *rôle* assigned me.

"Two years since, I was at Clermont on account of an affair of which it is unnecessary for me to speak. All the hotels were full, as it was during the assizes. I was passing through the streets with my valise in my hand in search of a lodging when I met Charliette face to face. I had a vague idea that this woman, married and established at Riom, had been Mademoiselle de Nives's nurse, but I was ignorant that she had remained faithful to her charge as a dog to its master. I did not even know that, on account of this devotion, she and her husband had since taken up their residence at Clermont. I repeat it, and I solemnly assure you, my dear uncle, that chance has been the powerful agent in all that concerns me.

"Charliette has been pretty ; she has still a fresh and agreeable countenance. I had been polite to her

at an age when I had no idea of anything else. We were, therefore, very well acquainted, and I was glad to meet her. I confided my embarrassment to her, asking if she knew of any furnished room that would answer my purpose.

“‘You need not go far,’ she replied ; ‘I have a furnished room that will suit you exactly. I do not use it, and I shall ask you no rent for it—too happy to render a service to a countryman, and especially to a brother of Miette, who is so good and ready to do a kind deed to every one. Come and see if the lodging suits you.’

“I followed her to a narrow and dark lane, running along high walls, and entered into an old house more picturesque than pleasant ; but the chamber in question answered my purpose, and Charliette’s husband offered it to me so cordially that, lest I should hurt the feelings of these worthy persons, I took immediate possession of my new quarters. I intended to take my dinner at an hotel, but they would not consent. Charliette said that she had formerly been the cook at the Château de Nives, and was sure she could suit me. In truth, her cooking was excellent ; but I am not aristocratic, and do not like to eat alone. I accepted only on condition of having my hosts at my table, and of seeing them served at my expense in the same manner as I was.

"The same night I went out to keep an engagement, taking a key of the house with me. This does not interest you, uncle ; but I am obliged to tell you in order to explain the conversation I had with Charliette the next evening.

"Her husband had gone to the workshop, and I was sitting at the table with her, tasting a quince-cordial of her making that had been bottled at least ten years, when she said to me :

" 'Are you going to run away again this evening, and return at three o'clock in the morning? Poor fellow! your health will be ruined by such late hours ; it would be far better for you to marry and settle down quietly. What do you think about it ?'

" 'No, indeed,' I answered. 'I have not yet exhausted the pleasures of youth.'

" 'But when you have, it will be too late, and you will find nothing but a rejection of your offers. If you will be reasonable, I can perhaps make a match for you beyond your hopes, even while you are still young and handsome.'

"At first I laughed at Charliette, but, when I found she was really in earnest, I was forced to listen to her. She talked of a fortune of more than a million, and a young woman of noble birth whom I already knew, since I had been in love with her.

“‘Ah!’ said I, ‘can it be possible that you are speaking of the little De Nives?’

“‘The little De Nives,’ she replied, ‘is now a young lady nineteen years old, beautiful and good as an angel.’

“‘But she is in the convent?’

“‘Yes, on the other side of this wall against which you are leaning.’

“‘Indeed?’

“‘It is just as I tell you. This old house, where we are, forms one of the out-buildings of the convent. I was established here as a tenant soon after Mademoiselle Marie was shut up in the convent. I promised to follow her, and we arranged beforehand a plan of action. I know how to play my part, although I could not conceal that I had been her nurse. The nuns, who wished to force her to take the veil, distrusted me a little when I asked for work, and questioned me adroitly to find out whether I should encourage the resistance of the young novice. I was more shrewd than they were: I replied that Marie was altogether wrong, that theirs was the happiest condition in life, and that I had always advised her to adopt it. They brought us face to face; but we were on our guard. She received me very coldly, and I accosted her in the harsh tone of a devotee determined to preach her a sermon. She sent me away in disgust.

The farce was well played. The community received me into great favor, and intrusted to me the washing of the linen for the chapel. I came off so well, and showed myself so assiduous in the performance of convent duties, that I was soon considered as belonging to the personal service of the community, and was free to go where I wished, and communicate as much as I pleased with Marie. If you will go up-stairs with me I will reveal a secret that you must not betray. Your sister is the best friend of my dear little one, and you would not wish to add to her unhappiness.'

"I swore to keep the secret, and went up a little breakneck stairway by the light of a candle that Charliette held. I found myself in an old storeroom, where, on lines arranged for this purpose, albs, surplices, and linen garments, embroidered or trimmed with lace, were hung to dry.

" 'See,' said Charliette, 'this is my work, and the way I earn my living. The abbés who officiate in the nuns' chapel say that nowhere else do they find vestments so white, well-starched, and comfortable: but this does not interest you. Wait; you are in the inside, or nearly so, of the convent, for the door that you see above those four steps communicates directly with the bell-turret of the chimes that announce the services. My husband, who is piously inclined, has been received into the house to keep these bells in

order, and repair them, if necessary. He has a key to this door, and he would not trust it to me during the night for anything in the world ; but the dear man must sleep, and, when I want the key, I shall have it. And, when Marie needs it, she will pass through this door to make her escape ! Do you understand me now ?’

“ ‘ I understand you perfectly ; and the thought of such a fine adventure makes me almost insane.’

“ My adventures in the city seemed no longer of any importance, and I did not go out that night. I talked all the evening with Charliette, who came back to renew the conversation after her husband had gone to bed. This devil of a woman wrought me up to such a state of excitement—I do not wish to conceal anything from you, uncle—that, if the thing had been possible at that moment, I would have carried Marie away immediately, regardless of the future.

“ But the consent of Mademoiselle de Nives must be obtained ; and as yet she knew nothing of the condition of affairs. Charliette’s plan had been improvised on seeing me. I had several days before me to reflect upon the undertaking, and a crowd of objections rose in my mind. This young lady who does not know me, whose sole idea of me rests upon the memory of the absurd letters that she perhaps still attributes to me—this noble girl, so rich, and probably so

proud, would most certainly reject Charliette's insinuations. What was my surprise when the next evening Charliette said to me: 'Everything works well; she did not say "No;" she wants to see you first; she well knows that you are considered the handsomest man in the country—but she has never seen you. Go Sunday morning to mass at the convent; she will be behind the curtain, so situated that she can look at you; only appear composed, and do not raise your eyes from your prayer-book; I will lend you one; besides, I shall be near to watch you. You must be prudent.'

"I was prudent, excited no remark, and Marie had a good opportunity to see me. In the evening Charliette brought me a letter of hers that I know almost by heart:

"'My good friend, I have seen him; I do not know whether he is witty or handsome—I am no judge of that—but he appears well, and I know from his sister that he has an excellent character. As to marrying him, that demands time for reflection. Tell him to come back in a year; if he has then made up his mind, perhaps I shall do the same; but I will make no engagement, and I shall hold fast to my determination.'

"I could have wished for a shorter probation—but I must abridge the story so as not to fatigue you.

Charliette could not obtain a more favorable answer, and I went back to the country very much absorbed in my romance. At the end of the year of trial—that is, last year—I returned secretly to Clermont, and quietly took possession of my room in Charliette's house.

“I said nothing to my sister of Marie's formal commands, for I was sure that Miette would not plead my cause. I learned, however, through her, that she was the confidante of Marie's desire to escape from the convent, and had entreated her to be patient until she became of age, offering her an asylum at her house when she was legally free. This did not favor my suit, for Marie, no longer needing my assistance when she became of age, would not have the least reason for choosing me in preference to any one else.

“However, my submission to the trial imposed, and my fidelity in returning at the appointed hour to receive her orders, pleaded for me. I had this time an interview with her in Charliette's storehouse. I was dazzled with her beauty; she was dressed as a novice, in white from head to foot, and as pale as her veil: but such eyes, mouth, and hands! I lost all control of myself in my passionate admiration, and, in spite of Charliette's presence, who did not leave her, I found words to declare my love.

“‘It is as I feared,’ she said; ‘you expect an an-

swer, and if I do not say "Yes" immediately, you will hate me.'

" 'No,' I replied ; ' I shall suffer much, but I will still submit a little.'

" 'Only a little ? Very well ! listen : I believe in you now, and rely on your assistance in escaping from this convent, where I am dying, as you plainly see ; but I have no desire to be married at present, and I will not accept any man who does not love me with the most absolute disinterestedness. If you are that man, you must prove it, and give me your aid without any conditions.'

" This decree did not alarm me ; it is out of the usual order of things if a man cannot make himself loved if he wishes it, and possesses ordinary advantages. I promised all that she demanded. She told me that she wished, as soon as she escaped from the convent, to take refuge with Miette, and to see me there secretly until she became better acquainted with me ; but she knew Miette would oppose every plan for a marriage between us, and she must not be allowed to have any suspicion of the contemplated arrangement. Marie was also sure of her willingness to receive her. ' I no longer fix any time,' she added, ' for I have already received proofs of your honor and devotion. When circumstances permit me to regain my liberty, I will send you this little ring that you see

on my finger. It will say : "I am waiting for you ; take me to your sister."

"After this interview, I was more in love with Marie than ever, and I assure you, uncle, that no other woman occupied my thoughts. My second probation was longer than I anticipated, almost as long as the first. I knew, through Charliette, who passed a day at Riom, that Miette insisted in her letters that Marie must wait until she was twenty-one years old. It was through Charliette that the two friends corresponded.

"I was almost discouraged as the epoch drew near, and thought, unless I carried her off, I should never be anything to her but a friend. However, one beautiful morning, about two months since, I received the gold ring, slender as a hair, carefully folded in a letter ! I set out, I ran, I flew, I arrived at the place appointed—"

"And you carried her away ? Then the story is finished !"

"No, uncle, it is just commenced."

"I understand very well ; but there are confidences I do not wish to receive, or boasting that I do not wish to listen to."

"Neither the one nor the other, uncle ; I will tell you the truth : Mademoiselle de Nives is always entitled to respect."

"That does not concern me."

"Which means that you doubt it! Well, will you believe me when I say that I behaved, not like the buffoon to whom you often do me the honor to compare me, but like the clown who draws the chestnuts out of the fire for—"

"For whom?"

"For the harlequin."

"Who is the harlequin?"

"Can you not guess?"

"No, unless you are jealous of Henri because he danced with the pretty peasant-girl this evening."

"Yes, I am very jealous, for there is something else."

"Then go on; I am listening attentively."

"I arrived at Clermont *incognito*; alighted, threaded my way carefully, and slipped stealthily into Charlotte's house at night, and gave expression to my joy and gratitude.

"‘Listen to me,’ she said; ‘fine words are only words. I am engaged in a matter that may have serious results, and, if my husband does not kill me when he finds out what I have undertaken to do, he will at least beat me. You are going to run away with a girl who is a minor. Her step-mother will make a public scandal of the affair; there will be a lawsuit, perhaps, in which I shall be implicated—at all

events, driven from the convent where I have a good place and the means of gaining a poor living ! I know very well that Mademoiselle Marie, who is rich, will reward me generously for all that I have done for her ; but there is my husband, who knows nothing and will countenance nothing. This will not prevent him from losing the custom of the convent and being obliged to leave the country on account of the reports that will be noised abroad. Will you not make some sacrifice on your side for my poor husband, who may not find another situation for a long time ? I am a poor woman, and do not know anything about business ; I do not even know if Mademoiselle Marie will be able to do me all the good she wishes to ; this is the reason I have brought you together, and you are so good and generous ! For all that, ideas change sometimes ; if you should forget or disown my services, you have bound yourself by no engagement, you have offered me nothing, promised me nothing.'

"I spare you the details, uncle. You must have foreseen, while listening to me, what then happened. I was simple enough never to have thought of it. I had indeed said to myself that there is no absolutely Platonic disinterestedness in this world, and that on the day when I married Mademoiselle de Nives we should have a generous nuptial gift to bestow on the good nurse. This was very simple, as it ought to be ;

but I had never expected that this woman would lay down her conditions beforehand and try to make me sign a note for twenty-five thousand francs. I hesitated for a long time : on one side, I was unwilling to purchase my marriage from such a wicked woman ; on the other, I was equally unwilling to bargain for the honor and the pleasure of carrying off my intended wife. I thought I could get out of the difficulty by promising to pay a round sum in Paris when I arrived there with Mademoiselle de Nives. Nothing would answer ; Charliette would not give her aid in the elopement unless she had the note in her pocket. I took my pen and began to write out a conditional promise. No, Charliette wished for a promise without any conditions. She maintained—and she was right to a certain point—that an engagement drawn up in this way compromised her, her husband, and myself. ‘I must,’ she said, ‘rely upon her sense of honor to tear up the note if the marriage did not take place ;’ but I could not resolve to risk losing twenty-five thousand francs without compensation, and we separated at midnight without coming to any conclusion, Charliette promising that the elopement should take place the next night if I yielded to her demands.

“I was so agitated and perplexed that I could not think of going to bed. My window looked out upon a bed of cabbages surrounded with a slight fence. On

one side was the garden of the little house hired by my hosts ; on the other side was the back part of the kitchen-garden of the convent. It could be cleared with a bound. I had made observations enough to know the locality by heart. On the side toward the street, our little yard had a door closely locked, and a very high wall defended with fragments of broken bottles; this door belonged to Charliette's tenement, and the key was not guarded by her husband with the same care as that of the storeroom. It often remained in the lock on the inside. There was, therefore, a means of escape in this direction as well as through the storeroom and the door of the house ; but Mademoiselle de Nives must be informed of it, and make her way from the convent-garden into the kitchen-garden. Absolutely, I did not know if the thing were possible.

“At all hazards, I determined to investigate the door of the little storeroom. Who knows if I could not discover some means of opening it ? I tried to go out. I saw that Charliette had locked the door of my room, and that I could not break the lock without making a great noise. I had with me my large country-knife supplied with instruments for all purposes, and I walked from the door to the window without any hope of finding an escape from my situation, when I fancied I saw a grayish figure glide along the fence, move away, and

return with every appearance of uneasiness. It must be Mademoiselle de Nives. I did not hesitate. I made signs with my lighted cigar that appeared to be perceived and understood, for the mysterious figure did not go away. Then with dexterity and promptness I took the bedclothes and tied them end to end. I fastened them as well as I could to my window, situated nearly twenty feet from the ground, and slid down. When this extemporized rope came to an end, I let go entirely, and fell among the cabbages without receiving the least injury. I ran to Mademoiselle de Nives, for it was indeed she ! With one kick I broke down the fence, took her by the hand without saying a word, and led her without making any noise to the door opening upon the street. The key was not in the lock, and my knife was not of an edge to struggle with this ancient and monumental work. Mademoiselle de Nives, astonished at this plan of escape, entirely different from what she had anticipated, asked me in a whisper where Charliette was.

“‘I am going for her,’ I said ; ‘remain in the shade, and do not stir !’

“I went into the artisan’s workshop to find some kind of a tool ; but, as I groped about in the darkness, a sudden inspiration recalled to my mind an insignificant circumstance of my first installation at Charliette’s house. At that time I asked her for the key of the

yard so that I might keep my appointment and return without disturbing any one. She said, as she gave it to me : ‘You must hang it, when you come back, on a large nail above my husband’s work-bench, lest he suspect something unusual. He is a devout person, and would be scandalized.’ I searched immediately for the nail where, two years before, I had replaced the key. There indeed it was ; I seized it, praying to Heaven that it might be the same.

“Fortune was on my side—it was the same ! It turned noiselessly in the lock ; and, seeing myself master of the field of battle in spite of my jailers, I could not help saying, with a smiling countenance :

“‘All is right ! My host, the locksmith, keeps everything in his department in good order.’

“‘Do you make puns at such a moment ?’ said Mademoiselle de Nives, full of amazement. ‘You have a remarkable degree of coolness !’

“‘No, I am gay—beside myself with joy,’ I replied, shutting the door carefully, ‘but I know what I am about.’

“‘You do not know ! you have forgotten Charliette, who is going to accompany us.’

“I invented an excuse. ‘She is waiting for us at the station,’ I said. ‘We must join her as quickly as possible !’

“I hurry her along through the dark and deserted

streets, and we soon reach the railway-station. A train has just arrived, and stops only five minutes. Marie lowers her veil, I buy the tickets, and hurry with her into an empty compartment.

“ ‘What does this mean?’ she cries, as she sees the cars starting. ‘I am here alone with you!’

“ ‘Yes, you are alone with me for the journey. Charlette’s courage failed her at the last moment, but I have enough for two. Can you trust me? Do you look upon me as an honest man?’

“ ‘You are a hero, Jacques! I believe in you, and will do as you wish. If Charlette is a coward, I am not; but I have no money, no luggage—’

“ ‘I have in my pocket all you need. With money one finds everything in Paris. You said you wished me to obey your commands unconditionally, and I promise obedience. Your esteem is the only recompense I demand; but I want it without reserve; your confidence will be the proof that I have obtained it.’

“ ‘You have it entirely, Jacques. I give it to you in the presence of God, who sees and hears us!’

“ ‘I found myself put upon my honor, but Mademoiselle de Nives helped me to control myself by her absolute ignorance of my agitation. She is a singular girl, as bold and courageous as a lion, innocent as a little child. She has not a particle of coquetry, and yet there is an irresistible seduction in her frankness

and simplicity. She has read, in her father's old château, romances of the age of chivalry ; I really believe she has never read anything else, and has always thought that every honest man was easily and naturally a perfect cavalier of the ancient times. She thinks that goodness is as easy to others as it is to herself. I learned to know her even to the bottom of her heart in the two hours' conversation we had together, and the more passionately I loved her, the more it became impossible for me to tell her so. I could do nothing but make protestation of my devotion and submission ; I saw plainly that not a word must I utter concerning love and marriage.

"As soon as the train had gone far enough to make it impossible for her to leave me, I determined to tell her the truth, and described my interview with Charlotte.

"When I saw,' added I, 'that this woman tried to take advantage of me, I lost all confidence in her. I feared also that, not being able to extort money from you, she would sell your secret to the Countess de Nives. I refused her aid, and relied only on myself to deliver you. Fortune is certainly on my side, for I do not yet know why you happened to be behind that fence.'

"I will tell you,' she replied. 'Every arrangement was made for my escape this very night. I was

already supplied with the disguise of a work-woman that I am now wearing. I promised to be at the door of the storeroom at midnight—my cell is close by—and this was easily accomplished. At midnight I was there, according to agreement ; but I scratched in vain upon the door—I even knocked cautiously ; it was not opened, and there was no response. I remained for a quarter of an hour almost beside myself with uneasiness and impatience. I thought Charliette's husband had found out our secret, and had shut his wife up. Even in that case you ought to be there, and would have spoken to me through the key-hole ; if necessary, you would have broken down the door. Some serious accident must have happened to you. I cannot tell you what tragic and frightful things I imagined. I could not endure this anguish, and resolved to enter Charliette's house through the garden to find out what was going on among you. I climbed over a *treillage* on the wall separating our flower-garden from the kitchen-garden. I am light and adroit ; reaching the top of the wall, I jumped down upon a heap of straw I saw on the other side. Then, while running to the fence, I saw your cigar shining like a bright point in the darkness, and watched the luminous whiffs you drew forth, until I comprehended that you were there and recognized me. What terror I felt in seeing you descend from the window so courageously !

After all, you are here, and my nurse abandons me ! What you tell me of her avarice grieves me without astonishing me very much. She has never asked me for money ; she knew I had none ; but she knew also that some day I should come into possession of my fortune, and gave me often to understand that she had a right to my gratitude. I am not disposed to forget her, and I will make no bargain with her ; but from this day I no longer accept her services, and will send her away if she tries to rejoin us.'

" 'There is no need of her coming,' I said. 'Trust me to render pursuit unavailing. However, if by a miracle she finds us, keep on the right side of her, and pretend to be ignorant of all I have told you ; otherwise she will hasten to denounce you.'

" Having arrived at Paris without molestation, we took refuge in the lodgings of Jules Deperches, my best friend in the city, who, I knew perfectly well, would be glad to render me any service in his power. Like an honest man, he gave up his apartment to us without asking a single question, or even seeing the veiled face of my companion. I hastened to hire a room for myself at the nearest hotel, and left Marie to repose.

" The next morning I lost no time in procuring linen, dresses, bonnets, boots, and an outside garment, for my poor Marie, destitute of everything. I did not

spare money ; I brought her a charming toilet, as well as the more simple one she asked for, not wishing her to attract attention.

“ I cannot describe the happiness the child felt in receiving these gifts and in beholding her beautiful dress and rich linen—she, who for years wore only the thick woollen garb of the young nun. I was delighted with the appreciation she manifested, and ran to buy for her gloves, a parasol, a watch, ribbons, and everything else I could think of ! She discovered that I had good taste, and promised to consult me always in regard to her toilet. She was absolutely on confidential terms with me, and called me her brother, her dear Jacques, her friend. The sweetest words issued from her lips ; her eyes caressed me ; she thought me handsome, lovable, brave, witty, charming ; she loved me at last, and I ventured to kneel before her, and entreat the happiness of kissing her hand.

“ How do you think she received my advances ? She held out her hand to me, and I was foolish enough to cover it with kisses. She drew it back brusquely, angry at first ; then her feelings found expression in a nervous burst of laughter.

“ ‘ What kind of manners are these, my dear Jacques ? ’ she said. ‘ I do not understand them ; but I feel that I do not like them. You forget who I am ; but, indeed, you do not know, and I see that it is time

to tell you. I am not what you suppose—a girl eager for freedom, and in a hurry to find a husband. I have not yet decided in regard to marriage. I am religious—a devotee, if you will—and a life of celibacy has always been my ideal. I have not been unhappy in the convent from the fault of those around me. It is the necessity for conformity to rule that was my enemy and my executioner. My life depends upon movement, air, and noise. My father was a horseman and a hunter; I take after him, resemble him, have his tastes; confinement kills me, and I have a horror of convents because they are the prisons where I have been forced to pass my life; but I love the nuns when they are good, because they are pure women, and their renunciation of the delights of domestic life seems to me an act of courage and heroism. Therefore I deceived no one when I said, as I often did, that I was not opposed to convent-life. My step-mother relied upon this declaration; and, when I refused to make an unconditional engagement before I became of age, she greatly feared lest I might dispose of my fortune to some community. She was even angry with the Abbess of Clermont, who did not wish me to be pressed too strongly. I have an idea in my head that I have not confided to any one, and I still dream of being able to realize it. I hope to recover my property, and I shall then found perhaps an order of Sisters of Mercy,

which I shall establish at Nives, to take care of the poor and the sick, and to bring up children. We shall not be cloistered, and we shall travel through the country continually to help the needy and to do good works. It seems to me that I shall be perfectly happy in carrying out this plan. I shall be equally devoted to a holy life, with charity for my only law of action, without being shut up alive in a tomb, or running the risk of letting the heart die out with the reason. You see, then, very plainly, my good Jacques, that you must not kneel before me, nor be always kissing my hand, as if I were a great lady, for I never shall be one.'

"Such is Mademoiselle de Nives's plan, and, if you see her, you will learn that she has not yet decided to modify it. You will say that it ought to have been in my power to make her change her resolution. You may well believe that I did my utmost ; but how can you persuade a woman, when you have nothing but words to use in the contest ? Pardon me, uncle, words are fine things when one possesses your power of using them. It was useless for me to study law ; I shall always talk like a villager, and I know nothing of the subtile arguments that hold, even against their will, such sway over those who listen. A woman is a being naturally captious, who cannot be taken hold of by the ears, and who submits to a certain magnetism only

when she does not keep herself too far away from the fluid ; but what can be done with a woman who will not allow the least familiarity, and who possesses such a spirit of strife and revolt that no one but a brute or a savage can tame her ?

“I was obliged to submit absolutely, and become an Amadis de Gaul, to be allowed to remain at her side. The worst of the affair is, that in this game I have become amorous as a schoolboy, and the fear of displeasing her has made me a drudge and a slave.

“Besides all that I have mentioned, she is full of contrasts and inconsistencies. She has been brought up in mysticism, while the cultivation of her reasoning powers has been systematically neglected. All her thoughts being turned toward heaven, she plays with the realities of the world as with charming nothings which she will leave behind, since religious exaltation carries her elsewhere. She is passionately fond of dancing, dress, and pleasure. When we were in Paris, after the first evening, she wanted to go to the theatre to see the decorations, the ballet, the opera, and the fairy-scenes, but did not care a particle for literary performances or tragedies, and could not endure the slightest indelicacy. She did not understand these things at all, and yawned while looking on ; but the grottoes of the sirens and the Bengal lights were happiness to her—almost delirium. I hired a corner-box

where it was very dark, and closeted myself with a pearl of beauty, admirably set ; and the box-keepers, who alone saw her charming face free from thick veils, smiled at my happiness, while I played the *rôle* of a great pedant condemned to explain strings and machinery to a child seven years old.—You are laughing at me, uncle ?”

“ Yes, I am laughing ; I find it a well-merited punishment for a Don Juan of the Latin Quarter, who takes it upon himself to elope with a novice without having suspicion of the kind of bird he has taken charge of. But, to come to the point, did she seek legal advice in Paris ? ”

“ Indeed she did ! Among her oddities, she possesses a surprising knowledge of business, and a facile memory of the law-terms connected with it. She consulted M. Allon, and now knows her situation on her finger’s end.”

“ Very well ; did she tell him that, in allowing herself to be carried off by a great paladin, well known in the country for his good luck, she gave arms against herself to a step-mother who is still her guardian, and who can reclaim her and reinstate her by force in the convent, if it were only for a week, with all the flourish of trumpets of a great scandal ? ”

“ I do not believe she told all this to her lawyer, but I think she told it to her confessor, for she had a

religious consultation with a very able and influential abbé, who, learning that she had more than a million to devote to the service of his faith, found her above all suspicion, and sheltered her from all danger. He advised her to separate from me as quickly as possible, and to keep concealed until the day she came of age. He did not, however, forbid her from regarding me as a brother and a friend; for Marie, who was unacquainted with my past follies, probably represented me to him as a lamb without spot, capable of giving her assistance in her holy enterprise. In short, all these proceedings being ended, we once more took the cars, and, after a week passed *tête-à-tête* in Paris with your humble servant, she returned to Vignollette on a beautiful summer night, as pure and tranquil as when she came out of the convent."

"Was it you, then, who accompanied her to your sister's house? I thought she arrived there with her nurse."

"Ah! I forgot to tell you. As we were leaving the railway-carriage to dine at Montluçon, whom should we meet but Charliette? She was on her way to Paris in search of us, and little thought of finding us so soon. Marie, guided by my advice, received her kindly. 'You were afraid at the last minute?' she said. 'This is all for the best, since you are not involved in the affair, and will be more useful than if

you had followed me to Paris. You can take me to Mademoiselle Ormonde's, and remain at Riom to gain information of my step-mother's proceedings.'

"Charliette went with her to Vignollette, and then rejoined her husband at Riom, where I have since met her. We two had a lively explanation. She naturally is in a rage with me, since I succeeded in frustrating her plans. At first she thought I had acquired the rights of marriage over Mademoiselle de Nives. When she found out her mistake, she raised her head and renewed the offer of her services on the same terms, pretending that, according to her anticipations, her husband, driven from the convent, had lost his situation and would encounter many obstacles in recovering the one he had formerly occupied at Riom. She threatened, in covert words, to reveal everything to the step-mother. I was obliged to come down with money, especially as I believe the honest and pious husband in perfect agreement with the wife to take advantage of the situation without appearing to know anything about it. However, I made a better bargain than the note of twenty-five thousand francs, and resolved, as soon as Marie came of age, to send the nurse about her business.

"Unfortunately, and against my sister's wishes, who dislikes and distrusts her, she has seen Marie very often during her stay at Vignollette. She has kept

her secrets faithfully, but has used every effort in her power to prejudice her against me ; and I am certain that she has suggested another husband to her, but I cannot tell whom she has chosen to supplant me, or upon whom she rests her new hope of a fortune. I know only one thing : this evening Henri accosted Mademoiselle de Nives like a person with whom she had made an appointment ; they talked in a low tone, but with much excitement, during the pauses in the *bourrée*, and afterward disappeared together. I thought I had planned so wisely in putting out the light ; it was indeed a brilliant idea ! They took advantage of it to run away ! ”

“ Where do you think they have gone ? If it is to Vignollette, I am certain that Henri will not allow himself to cross the threshold.”

“ I do not think they have gone there, for this very reason. Perhaps Marie has taken it into her head to return to the convent and remain during the last days of her minority.”

“ In that case, Henri would have given better advice than you did.”

“ And his position in regard to her would be better than mine,” replied Jacques, with a sigh.

“ Hush ! ” I said. “ Some one is calling us—it is Henri’s voice.”

He soon joined us.

"I was uneasy about you, father," he said. "All our relatives have gone, regretting not being able to say good-by. My mother is waiting for you at Father Rosier's."

"And where have you been," I replied, "during the two hours that I have been in search of you?"

"You were in search of me? Not in this mysterious wood, where you have been with Jacques for an hour at least?"

"But where do you come from?"

"From home. I returned a little fatigued and bored with this ball in the midst of the dust; but not seeing you, I thought you might want me perhaps, and came back to the *fête*, which is finished, and my mother is very impatient."

We left Jacques slightly reassured, and went to deliver Madame Chantabel, who, accusing me of being delayed by a client, stormed for the hundred-thousandth time against pleaders and advocates.

Did Henri wish to confide anything, or make a confession of any kind to me? As soon as we returned, in order to give him the opportunity, I went with him to his room to smoke a cigar before going to bed.

"You know," I said, while talking of the events of the day, "that Miette came to bring her bouquet to me?"

"I know it," he replied, "and regret not having seen her."

"Who told you that she came?"

"A servant; I cannot remember who it was."

"She was at the *fête* this evening. You did not come near us, though we saw you from Rosier's garden dancing with a very pretty village-girl."

"Yes, I danced one *bourrée*, thinking it would amuse me as it used to."

"And that wearied you?"

"If I had known that Miette was there—"

"You would have invited her, I suppose?"

"Certainly. Did she see me when I was dancing?"

"I don't know; I was looking at your partner. Do you know what a remarkable person she is?"

"Yes, for a peasant; very white, with small hands."

"Who is she? and where does she come from?"

"I did not think to ask her."

In making this reply Henri threw his cigar into the fireplace, as much as to say, "Is it not about time to go to sleep?"

I left him without urging him any more. Either he was sincere, and ought not to suspect what was passing in my mind, or he was determined to be silent, and I had no right to question him. My son was

not as easily penetrated as his cousin Jacques. He possessed a stronger will and greater breadth of character.

The next day and the day after, in order to see him even for a little while, I was obliged to climb up to the tower, where he had installed himself with two workmen and a servant. He was so delighted with this romantic spot, that he was fitting up a lodging-room for a refuge when stormy weather surprised him in his walks.

"You are in a great hurry," I said, finding him engrossed with painting and hanging. "I agreed to let you have one or two rooms furnished to suit your own taste, and you have carried out my economical ideas too rigidly."

"Not at all, father," he replied ; "I know very well that I am a spoiled child, and that you would deny me nothing for my pleasure ; but, while examining the locality, I discovered that it would be in better taste to leave the rooms in their old-fashioned rusticity than to make additions and improvements. Here are the two apartments that old Coras occupied. I have put this great sofa of Cordova leather in the bedroom instead of the broken-down bed. The hangings are in good order, excepting the dust that has settled upon them, and I have found a carpet to conceal the broken tiles. The casements close firmly. This ceiling, with

joists blackened by smoke, has an excellent tone. In short, a great deal of sweeping was required, and a few repairs in the painting that will be dry this evening. To-morrow I shall bring some books and a good old-fashioned table, and I shall be like a prince."

The next day he finished his furnishing with the surplus of our old rubbish, and passed the afternoon in arranging the books he had chosen in the closets.

I was intending to go to Vignolette to find out if my niece was in a more tranquil frame of mind, when I received the following note :

"Do not be troubled about me, my good and dear uncle ; we had no discussion of affairs at home. I found my companion there on my arrival : she had returned with her nurse, and did not say a word of her thoughtless freak. I thought it was my duty to ignore it utterly, and not to oppose her evening walks with this woman, who now comes every day, and appears to have acquired much more influence over her than I have. I do not wish to be mixed up too much with their petty secrets ; my duty is limited to hospitality. Fortunately, time moves on, and will soon release me from a responsibility always painful when unaccompanied by authority."

This missive did not make me feel any more at

ease, and I began to watch Henri stealthily with scrupulous attention.

I remarked on this same evening, as well as the evening before, that he rose from table when coffee appeared, and went away with Ninie on his shoulders to "play horse" in the garden. There were shouts and bursts of laughter, then the noise grew faint in the distance, and at the end of half an hour the child returned with her nurse. Henri did not reappear until an hour later, saying that he had smoked his cigar out-doors, that his mother might not be annoyed.

On the third day of these proceedings I resolved to disburden my mind. Circumstances favored my intention : Madame Chantabel had two old friends for guests, who plunged into cards with her as soon as dinner was over. She did not concern herself about the little girl, who seemed to adore Henri, and on whom Henri seemed to dote.

The days were rapidly growing shorter. I waited for the twilight, increased by the thick foliage of clumps of trees, to steal into the garden, and thence into a neighboring meadow, where a double foot-path ascended in one direction to the tower and in the other descended to the village.

I heard the child's voice coming from a clump of willows shading a spring on the border of the meadow, just at the foot of the rock that bears the tower.

THE TOWER OF PERCEMONT.

I turned my steps in that direction, keeping close to the bushes, and soon saw Henri come out of the willow-trees, bearing Ninie in his arms. He took the shortest course—that is, instead of going, as I did, along the hedge, he followed the path leading to the garden. Evidently he was carrying the child to the house to give her back to her nurse ; but he was going to return. I was on the watch, and saw two women come from under the willow-trees, take the path to the tower, and disappear in the foliage of the vines covering the hillock. I still waited, perfectly quiet, in the thicket, but I did not see my son return as I anticipated. Upon reflection I said to myself, if he returned to the tower he took a more direct road—he crossed the nursery and climbed the rock perpendicularly.

I heard the village clock strike. It was only eight o'clock. Henri would not reappear in the drawing-room till nine. He had, then, already returned to the tower. I could go there through the vines, since the two women had got the start of me. I did not hesitate, and, although the ascent in this direction was steep, I arrived at the foot of the tower in less than ten minutes. It was entirely dark ; there was no moon, and the sky was overcast, but it was silent and calm. I could easily conceal myself even when approaching near the entrance, and my information must be obtained through the sense of hearing. This was

neither long nor difficult. Henri and one of the women were standing three steps from me; the other woman kept watch at a little distance.

"Now, then," said Henri, "have you decided?"

"Yes, positively decided."

"Very well; do not return to-morrow—it is useless."

"Oh, yes, again to-morrow! Do let me come."

"I warn you that it is very imprudent."

"I know nothing about prudence; what do you know of it?"

"I have some to spare!"

"I am above all this idle talk, and have a higher aim than to watch that chimera which in human language is called reputation. I am responsible only to God; and, if I do right in his eyes, I may laugh at everything else."

"But you wish to be successful, and must not create useless obstacles. If your secret is discovered, the object of your solicitude will be sent away."

"How will my secret be discovered unless you betray me?"

"I have sworn that I will not betray you; but the child will talk."

"What can she say? She saw a peasant-girl, who embraced and caressed her—that is all. My dear friend, let me come to-morrow!"

"To-morrow it will rain in torrents: the sky is covered with clouds."

"If it rains, do not bring Ninie; I will come just the same to hear news of her."

"Very well; on one condition, that it shall be the last time, and you will allow me immediately after to confide everything to my father."

"Let it be so! Adieu until to-morrow. O my dear friend, may God be with you and bless you, as I bless you! Adieu!"

She called her companion with a light whistle, and both took their way through the pines. Henri followed them to the verge of the woods, as well as I could judge from the light sound of their footsteps on the paths and over the dead branches.

XI.

ALTHOUGH I found it necessary to watch my son's movements, I did not wish him to have the least suspicion of it. I went home, and, when he appeared, did not give him a hint of my discovery. Jacques arrived about ten o'clock, saying that he had just returned from a hunting-party, and could not pass the door without coming in to inquire after our welfare.

"Didn't you kill anything?" said Madame Chan-

tabel; "for, contrary to your usual luck, your hands are empty."

"Pardon me, aunt," he replied, "I have left one poor hare in the kitchen."

"Will you play a game of piquet with your uncle?"

"I am at his disposal."

I saw plainly that Jacques had something to tell me.

"Perhaps we had better take a walk in the garden instead," I answered, taking his arm.—"You have a great fire for the season, ladies, and it is stifling here."

"Well, what is the news?" I said to my great boy of a nephew, when we were alone. "You appear to be entirely cast down."

"Cast down to the depths, cast down to death, my good uncle! It is just as I told you—Henri treads upon my heels. There is an appointment every evening at the tower of Percemont."

"Who told you so?"

"I saw, I watched, I followed. This very evening—"

"Did you listen?"

"Yes, but I couldn't hear anything."

"Then you are an unskillful fellow. He who does not hear the clock knows nothing of its sound."

"Do you expect me to believe that Mademoiselle de Nives has a meeting with Henri to tell over her beads?"

"Did she pass her time in this way when she was with you?"

"She made fun of me, and perhaps she is now doing the same with my cousin; but in making fun of everybody she risks her honor, and that is serious."

"Did you not tell me that it was impossible to subdue her will, or take advantage of her innocence?"

"I said that on my own account, for I am little skilled in the use of words or in the eloquence that produces conviction. Henri is an advocate; he knows how to say—"

"Then he is more dangerous than you, whom I believed irresistible."

"Ah! uncle, you are laughing at me, which means that you abandon my cause!"

"Have I promised to help on your love-affairs?"

"You listened to my story with an attention that I took for interest."

"I have not made up my mind upon the subject, and am very little interested in your projects for securing a fortune. If you think of marrying a million, that is an affair between you and Charliette, and I will not be mixed up with it."

"Uncle, you humiliate me. In truth, you treat me with great injustice. The million is of no value, if the wife is dishonored."

"She is not—of this I am sure; but she will sure—

ly be some day, if she shows the same want of judgment as she has already done."

"You know, then—"

"I know what you are going to tell me, and make this reply: If she has relations with Henri they are and must remain pure; but if this young lady takes every day a new confidant, she will end by finding some one who will compromise her, and the scandal will be reflected upon your sister. As, however, it is she, she alone, who interests me in the whole affair, I shall to-morrow commence proceedings to put an end to a vexatious and ridiculous situation."

"To commence proceedings? Ah! uncle, what are you going to do? Inform Madame de Nives? ruin this poor child?"

"Why, then, do you accuse her?"

"I do not accuse her! I complain of her, that is all; but I would sooner cut off both hands than do her an injury. If you knew how grand and good she is with all her faults, you would excuse her as being simply a little absurd and romantic!"

"However, if she leaves you in the lurch, and if, after having deluded you with her mystic projects, she takes a husband, and this husband is not you?"

"Well! uncle?"

"Will you not seek to be revenged?"

"No, never! On that day I shall get drunk like

a Pole, or shoulder my fowling-piece, I cannot tell which ! but to wrong her, to speak evil, to betray—no ! I could not ! She is not like any other woman ; she is an angel, a strange angel, an insane angel ; there are some perhaps like her in this way ; but she is also the personification of a kind heart, good intentions, disinterestedness, and charity. An act that would be wrong in another person is not so for her. No ! she must not be harmed. No, uncle, forget everything I have told you.”

“ Well done ! ” I replied, taking Jacques’s hand in mine ; “ I see that you are still my sister’s child, the good Jaquet who never injures any one but himself, and redeems everything with his heart. I think now that you really love Mademoiselle de Nives. If she possesses the noble qualities you say she has, I promise to do everything in my power to bring about your marriage with her. I will see her, question her, and study the matter thoroughly.”

“ Thanks, my dear uncle ! but your son—”

“ My son has nothing to say concerning it.”

“ Indeed—”

“ Do not talk to me of him before I understand the state of affairs. Go to bed, and give up being a spy. I will watch, but I will watch alone. You understand me ! Keep quiet, or I will abandon your cause.”

The big Jaquet embraced me, and I felt his warm

tears on my cheeks. He went to take leave of my wife, grasped Henri's hand convulsively, and, mounting his pony, set off at full gallop for Champgousse.

I waited patiently through the whole of the next day. As Henri had foreseen, it rained incessantly, and it was impossible for Mademoiselle Ninie to go out. After dinner she climbed upon his shoulders and whispered to him.

"You two have secrets?" said my wife, struck with the sly and mysterious appearance of the child.

"Oh, yes, great secrets, and I shall not tell," replied she, putting her little hands over Henri's mouth. — "Don't tell them anything, my dear Henri, and please carry me to the fountain."

"No, it is impossible," said Henri. "There is no fountain this evening. The rain would swamp our paper-boats; we must wait for another day."

He got up and went out. Ninie began to cry. My wife wished to console her. I did not give her an opportunity, for, taking her in my arms, I carried her to my study to show her some pictures. When she had forgotten her disappointment, I endeavored, without questioning her, to find out if she were capable of keeping a secret; I promised to make beautiful paper-boats for her the next day, and to make them sail on the pond in the garden.

"No, no," she said; "your pond is not pretty

enough. On the fountain in the meadow ! there the water is beautiful and clear. And there, too, is Suzette, who knows how to amuse me better than you, better than Henri, and all the world."

"Suzette is, then, a little girl of your own age, whom you have met there?"

"Of my age? I don't know; she is larger than I am."

"Large as Bébelle?"

"Oh, no, and not so old! Suzette is very pretty, and loves me so much!"

"And why does she love you so much?"

"Bless me! I don't know; perhaps it is because I love her in the same way, and embrace her as much as she wants me to. She says that I am pretty and very lovable."

"And where does Suzette live?"

"She lives—bless me! I guess she lives at the fountain; she is there every evening."

"But there are no houses there."

"That is true. Then she comes to see me so as to make boats for me."

"This, then, was your great secret with Henri?"

"I was afraid Bébelle wouldn't let me go out."

I saw that the child had not been intrusted with the secret, and would easily forget the pretended Suzette if she did not see her before her mother's return.

I saw, also, why Henri had been in such a hurry to put the old room in order at Percemont, for, regardless of the rain, he went there as he had promised, and did not return until ten o'clock. When his mother had gone to bed, he said to me :

"I deceived you the other day, my dear father. Allow me to relate to you this evening the true story ; but, to commence quickly and clearly, read this letter that I received by post on St.-Hyacinthe's-evening."

"SIR : Render a great service to a person who has faith in your honor. Be to-morrow evening at the *fête* of Percemont. I will be there, and will whisper in your ear the name of Suzette."

"You see the orthography is a little fanciful. I imagined some frivolous adventure or a demand for assistance. I followed you to the *fête*, and saw Jacques dancing with a fascinating village-girl, with whom he appeared to be very much enamored, and who, passing near me, threw adroitly into my ear the word agreed upon—'Suzette.'

"I invited her to dance with me, to Jacques's great displeasure, and we came rapidly to an explanation during the *douillée*.

"'I am not Suzette,' she said, 'but Marie de Nives. I am living in strict concealment at Vignolette. Emi-

lie, my excellent, my best friend, does not know that I am here, and her brother Jacques is displeased with me for coming. I have not told them my secret, for they would say I did a foolish thing ; however, I wish to do this foolish thing, and I will do it, unless you refuse your assistance and friendship. I demand them, and I have a right to expect them. You did me a great wrong without suspecting it. When I was at the convent of Riom, you wrote me letters that were looked upon as criminal. On account of these unfortunate letters, I was taken from this convent, where I was loved and treated kindly, and shut up at Clermont under more severe regulations. Jacques helped me to escape. I went to Paris to obtain legal advice. I now understand my rights, and shall soon come into possession of my estates ; but, while I condemn my step-mother, there is in my heart one tender and ardent desire : I want to see her daughter, my poor father's daughter, my little sister Léonie. She is at your house ; manage in some way to let me see her. The present time is favorable, and another such opportunity may perhaps never occur. Your whole family is here ; the child is alone with her nurse in your house. I have skillful spies at my command, who keep me informed of all that goes on. Take me to your house, let me only see my sister. I will just look at her while she is sleeping, and I will not waken her. Grant me the

privilege of seeing her, and I shall owe you eternal gratitude.'

"The time and the place were not suitable for discussion. I cannot tell what answer I should have made if it had not been for an awkward incident provoked by Jacques's jealousy. He put out the signal-light, and, in the confusion that followed, Mademoiselle de Nives, seizing my arm with an extraordinary nervous force, hurried me along into the darkness, saying:

"'Now, God wills it, you see: let us go to your house.'

"I was literally blind. This light, that was bright enough to put one's eyes out, having been suddenly extinguished, I walked without knowing where my steps tended, and my companion seemed to lead me. After a minute or two, I recognized that we were going in the direction of the meadow, and that we were not alone. A man and woman were walking in front of us.

"'It is my nurse and her husband,' said Mademoiselle de Nives; 'they are faithful servants, fear nothing: I have others besides these in my service. I have my sister's nurse, who was discharged, and now watches over my interests.'

"'Do you know,' I said, 'that you make me uneasy by acting in this way?'

"'How is that?'

“‘Perhaps you have a plan of carrying off the child, in order to have the mother in your power. I give you warning that I shall oppose it absolutely. She has been confided to my parents, and, although this confidence is a little strange, we are responsible, and consider the trust sacred.’

“‘You have a very bad opinion of me,’ she replied, ‘and must have heard many unkind reports concerning me. I do not deserve them, and am resigned to wait for the future to justify me.’

“Her voice has a penetrating clearness and sweetness. I was ashamed of my suspicions, and tried to make excuses for my brutality.

“‘Do not speak,’ she said; ‘it will delay us—run!’

“And she hurried across the meadow, scarcely touching the soil, light as a bird of night.

“We stopped a moment when we arrived at the garden-gate.

“‘I have not yet found,’ I said, ‘a way of taking you to the child without danger of your being seen by the servant who has charge of her. I warn you that Mademoiselle Ninie sleeps in my mother’s chamber, and that during her absence a nurse, installed in an easy-chair, sleeps perhaps very lightly. I know nothing about her; she is a young peasant with whom I am not acquainted.’

“ ‘I am acquainted with her,’ replied Mademoiselle de Nives ; ‘ she came to Emilie’s, a fortnight since, to ask for work. We gave her some, and I know that she is gentle and good. Do not be troubled. I know, also, that she sleeps soundly, for she did not waken during a frightful storm. Come, quick, let us enter ! ’

“ ‘ Allow me—you must enter alone with me. The persons who accompany you will remain here to wait for you.’

“ ‘ Of course.’

“ I led her, without noise, to my mother’s chamber, guiding her through the dark passage-ways. I entered first, softly. The little nurse did not stir. A candle was burning on a table behind the curtain. Mademoiselle de Nives took it resolutely, in order to look at the sleeping child ; then gave it to me, and, kneeling by the bedside, glued her lips to Nimie’s little hand, saying, as if she were praying to God :

“ ‘ Grant that she may love me—I swear to love her dearly ! ’

“ I touched her gently on the shoulder. She arose and followed me submissively to the garden. There she took both my hands in hers, saying to me :

“ ‘ Henri Chantabel, you have given me the greatest happiness I ever experienced in my hard and sad life ; you are now for me like one of those angels

whom I often invoke, and who inspire me with calmness and courage during my meditations. I am a poor girl, without mind and without instruction. Those who had charge of me brought me up in this way; they did it on purpose, for they thought the more ignorant I was the less power I should have to assert my rights. But the light necessary to guide my steps comes from above; no one can put it out. Have confidence in me, as I had confidence in you. Confidence is so noble! Without it everything is evil and impossible. Permit me to see my sister again, to hear her voice, to read her looks, and to receive her first kiss. Let me return to-morrow, disguised as to-day. Remember, no one knows my face; your parents have never seen me, and Madame de Nives herself would perhaps not recognize me, for she has not seen me for many years. I will hide somewhere, you will bring Léonie to me, you will be there, and you will not leave her. Must I entreat you on my knees? Behold me—here I am!’

“A little disturbed by her exaltation, but conquered by the charm emanating from so remarkable a person, I consented to a meeting at the tower of Perceмонт the next day at dusk, promising to find some means of taking her sister to meet her, and I asked permission to inform you of what was going on.

“‘Oh, no, not yet!’ she cried. ‘I shall tell

everything to your father myself, for I have much to tell, and he will be obliged to listen to me ; it is his duty to Madame de Nives and my sister. I can ruin them, but I do not wish to. There is one thing on which I have not entirely made up my mind : I must see the child again, and, if your parents oppose it, I should not know what I ought to do. Promise to keep my secret for a few days.'

" 'Well, I promise. But Jacques? What shall I say to him if he asks me any questions?'

" 'He will not ask you any questions.'

" 'Is he not your *fiancé*?'

" 'No, he is nothing to me but a generous and excellent friend.'

" 'But he loves you. That is very clear.'

" 'He loves me, yes, and I return it with all my heart ; but there is not a word of love-making between us. You swear to keep my secret?'

" 'Yes, I swear.'

" 'Oh, how I love you !'

" 'Not so much as Jacques !'

" 'Still more.'

" After this she took flight with her companions, leaving me astonished and nearly stunned with the adventure.

" The next day—that is, day before yesterday—I decided upon the fountain in the meadow as the most

favorable place for the meeting. I found means of informing Charliette, that devoted nurse, who came in the daytime to explore the wood of Perceмонт so as to find her way about without following the beaten paths. She is a skillful and sagacious woman. I showed her the fountain from the hill above it, and the path through the vines that leads to it. I took down the fences, and the same evening, while playing with Ninie, carried her, without telling her anything, to the meeting with her sister, who was waiting for her under the willows. The acquaintance was quickly made, thanks to the paper-boats ; but I must say that Mademoiselle de Nives's passion for this child was like that of an irresistible lover. In a moment Léonie was hanging upon her neck, and devouring her with caresses. She was unwilling to leave her, and I could only induce her to go back to her nurse by promising to bring her the next day to the fountain and Suzette.

"Yesterday I kept my word. Suzette had crammed her pockets with rose-colored and blue paper. She made, with the dexterity of a nun, charming little boats that floated delightfully ; but Ninie was not so much amused as on the evening before. She had made up her mind never to leave Suzette, and insisted upon taking her home with her for a nurse. I had great trouble in separating them. Finally, this evening for the last time I saw Mademoiselle de Nives in the tower,

where we had agreed to meet. I considered this interview useless to her plans, and allowed it with regret, since the bad weather prevented me from taking Léonie to her sister. I went to the meeting a little out of temper. Mademoiselle de Nives is an irritating person. She throws herself on your neck, morally speaking. She has inflections of tenderness and exaggerated expressions of gratitude which must trouble poor Jacques profoundly, and have made me impatient more than once ; but it is impossible to give expression to the disapprobation she provokes. She is not affected, she does not study an attitude, she is naturally beyond the region of probability, and yet she is in the right when her point of view is accepted. We talked for two hours, *tête-à-tête*, in the tower, where I had kindled a great fire of pine-cones to dry her wet garments, and was obliged to see that she was warm in spite of herself. Fearless, and like one insensible to all external influences, she had walked smiling under a beating rain, and smiled anew in seeing me troubled on account of her health. She manifested no more embarrassment nor fear in finding herself alone with me, coming to an interview dangerous to her reputation, than if I had been her brother. The nurse staid below in the kitchen, warming herself also, and troubling herself no more at leaving us together than if eccentricities of this kind were nothing new

to her. All this would have turned the head of an ambitious fool, for Mademoiselle de Nives is an eligible person, and can be easily compromised ; but I hope that you have a sufficiently good opinion of me to be very certain that I have not made love to her, and shall not do so. This is my romance, dear father. Tell me what you think of it, and if you blame me for having allowed the *adverse party*—for my mother pretends that you are the defender and legal adviser of the countess—to embrace her little sister Ninie without your knowledge ? ”

XII.

“REDUCED to these proportions, the affair is not serious,” I replied ; “but you have not told me the most important part—your conversation of this evening, your only conversation ; for, until this time, you could exchange nothing but a few interrupted words, as you were not alone together.”

“Yes, indeed ! the two preceding days I escorted her half-way to Vignollette through the woods ; the nurse—I ought to say the duenna—walked at a respectful distance.”

“Then you know what those great projects are upon which Mademoiselle de Nives, your client, intends to converse with me ? ”

"An attempt at reconciliation between her and her step-mother ; Mademoiselle de Nives wishes to be at liberty to see her sister occasionally."

"I believe that the interviews will be dearly purchased, and the requirements for making such an engagement serious. Marie de Nives has no power over Léonie de Nives, and the law will give her no support."

"She relies upon you to find the means."

"Do you see any ?"

"I see a thousand if your client looks only for money, as mine claims she does. The important question is, the duration of the friendship of the two sisters."

"Everything appears simple when suppositions are taken for accomplished facts. Suppose that my client—since client she is, according to you—has an unconquerable aversion to her step-daughter, that she fights for her fortune, but that it is only for her daughter's sake, and that she would like better to have her remain poor than be exposed to the influence of a person of whom she has so poor an opinion ?"

"You will plead with her for poor Marie."

"Poor Marie is greatly to be pitied for the past ; but, now she is free, I own that I feel no special interest in her."

"You are not acquainted with her yet."

"I accept her as you paint her, and as Jacques has

described her. Your two versions, differently drawn up, agree in essential points. I think she is an excellent person, with very pure intentions. Is that sufficient to make her a judicious woman, a serious being, capable of directing a child like Léonie, and of inspiring some confidence in her mother? I do not believe her capable of inspiring respect."

"Indeed! I assure you she is deserving of great respect."

"That is to say, you have been very much interested in her, and have known how to conceal it from her through respect for yourself!"

"Do not speak of me; I am out of the question. Speak of Jacques."

"Jacques has been still more interested and probably more timid than you. Jacques is a youth whose wild deeds and depths of sentiment need not be much dreaded by any person ever so badly brought up. Shall I tell you what I think? I do not believe your client in danger, but I think her dangerous. I see her in a very agreeable and even diverting situation, since she finds means to reconcile in her conscience, obscurely enlightened from above—or from below—the frivolous pleasures of life with celestial ecstasy. She cherishes in the convent the idea of being a wise virgin, but has the instincts of a foolish virgin, and, from the moment that she throws off the restraint of

austerity which, armed at all points, forms the strength of Catholicism, I do not see where she will stop. She has nothing to put in the place of this terrible yoke necessary to minds without culture, and consequently without reflection. She has no philosophy to create a law for herself, and no appreciation of social life and the obligations it imposes. She forms a fantastic idea of duty, seeks her own in the combinations of romance, and has not the least idea of the most simple moral obligations. It pleases her to leave the convent before the time—close at hand—fixed by the law for her deliverance; she did not know how to find a proper protection for this rash act, and accepts that of a woman who speculates upon the liberality of the suitors she recruits. She finds it natural to accept Jacques Ormonde for a liberator, passes eight days alone with him, and, as he does not inspire her with love—so I understand—cares very little for the passion aroused in his breast, the hopes he cherishes, the burst of anger and suspense she imposes upon him.”

“Father, she is entirely ignorant of these things, and has no idea of the passion of love.”

“So much the worse for her! A woman should have an intuitive perception of what she does not know by experience; otherwise she is not a woman, she is a hybrid, mysterious and suspicious, whom every one should be afraid of. Who can tell where the

awakening of the senses will lead such a person? I believe that the senses already play the principal part in that angelic chastity that drives the young lady from Jacques's arms into yours."

"Say, rather, from Jacques's arm to mine; she has sought and found only protectors."

"One improvised protector is a great deal. Two are much too many for two months of liberty! Why has not this heroine of romance succeeded in overcoming my repugnance to become acquainted with her and listen to her story? Since she knows how to disguise herself so well, she might have found entrance here as a servant—we were looking for one to take care of the child!"

"She thought of it, but was afraid of my mother's penetration, who she knows is prejudiced against her."

"She was afraid of your mother, and she was afraid of me! Invited by Miette and Jacques to trust her affairs to me, she did not dare to follow their advice—she does not yet dare. She prefers to apply to you in order to see her sister, as she applied to Jaquet to escape from her cage. Shall I tell you why?"

"Tell me, father."

"Because the support of young men is always assured to a pretty girl, while the old exercise their judgment in the question. Beauty produces a rapid proselytism. A young man is combustible material,

and does not resist like an old, incombustible man of the law. With a tender glance and a suppliant word, in the twinkling of an eye, she finds brilliant cavaliers ready for every foolish enterprise. She trusts to them her most intimate secrets, and they are delighted to be received as confidants. Is this confidence the supreme favor? She lures them on in this way and very soon controls them. She accepts their love provided they do not express their feelings too plainly, exposes them without scruple to scandalous tongues, makes use of their money—”

“Father—!”

“Not you! but Jacques is already in for a large sum, I tell you. She is rich, will pay her obligations, and preserve a sincere gratitude for the two friends—except by marrying a third; the others will get out of the affair as they like. I tell you, my son, you have just passed two hours in a *île-à-île*, intoxicating and painful at the same time, with an angel; but, united with this angel, there is an ungrateful devotee and, perhaps, a consummate coquette. Take care of yourself—listen to what I say to you!”

My son, while listening to me, moved about uneasily, his eyes fixed upon the embers, and his face pale in spite of the red light reflected upon it by the fire. It seemed to me I had touched the right chord.

“Then,” he said, rising and fixing upon me his

great, black eyes full of expression, "you blame me for having helped to carry out the plans of this young woman?"

"Not at all. At your age I should have done the same thing; only, I tell you to be on your guard."

"Lest I fall in love? You take me for a school-boy."

"It is not very long since you were one, and this is all the better for you."

He reflected a few moments, and replied:

"That is true; it is not very long since I was in love with Miette, when the thought of her made my heart beat, and kept me from sleeping. Miette is much more beautiful now; above all, she has an expression, and I do not see that freshness and health injure the ideal in a type of woman. The Greek statues have rounded outlines in poetry. Mademoiselle de Nives is pretty like a little boy. Her paleness is a matter of fancy. And then it is not beauty that takes possession of the heart—it is character. I have studied this character—a character entirely new to me—more judiciously than you think; and, in all that you have just said, I think there is much truth, in regard to ingratitude, especially. I could not help telling her that she made Jacques suffer cruelly; she believed herself justified in saying that she had made no promises to him."

"She does something worse that you did not think of. She tries to injure Emilie's character."

"I thought of it, and told her so. What do you think she said in reply? 'Emilie's character cannot be injured. She possesses a purity beyond all stain. If any one said that I behaved improperly while under her roof, the whole country would reply with one single voice that it was against your cousin's will or without her knowledge. And you also, would you not cry out to the detractors, "You spoke falsely! The proof of her respectability is, that she is my betrothed, and I am going to marry her?"'"

"Very well. Did you reply to this question directly?"

"I made no reply. It was repulsive to me to discuss Emilie and my secret sentiments with a person who cannot comprehend human sentiments."

"I regret that you made her no answer."

"Tell me, father, do you think that Emilie—"

"Go on. Emilie—"

"She must know that her friend has been absent every evening for some days?"

"It seems impossible that she can be ignorant of it. The house at Vignolette is large, but in such a secluded life the absence of one of the two inmates must be noticed."

"Mademoiselle de Nives pretends that Emilie asks

no questions and manifests no uneasiness. How do you explain this ? ”

“ By the religion of a generous hospitality. See the letter I received from her yesterday. ”

Henri read the letter and returned it.

“ I see, ” he said, “ that in the bottom of her heart the good and dear child blames her strange companion. She is right. Did you notice that she was unhappy the last time you saw her ? ”

“ Emilie unhappy ? No, but displeased. ”

“ Displeased with Mademoiselle Marie ? ”

“ Evidently. ”

“ And perhaps also with me ? ”

“ I don't know what she thought about you. ”

“ Mademoiselle de Nives says that Miette has a great sorrow. ”

“ For what reason ? ”

“ That is the reply I made ; there is no reason for it. Miette is not in love with me. ”

“ And you added, ‘ I am not in love with her ? ’ ”

“ No, father, I did not say so ; I avoided speaking of myself ; it could not interest Mademoiselle de Nives. What day will you receive her ? ”

“ She runs the risk of meeting her step-mother, who may, who ought to return for her daughter at any moment. ”

"Madame de Nives cannot return yet ; she is ill in Paris."

"Who told you so ?"

"Mademoiselle de Nives has her closely watched. She took the influenza while running around Paris and the suburbs to surprise her in some *flagrante delicto* favorable to her hostile plans ; as she had only false information, she made no discoveries."

"This young woman may then come to the tower to-morrow with Miette. Your mother intends to pay visits at Riom, and will know nothing of the affair. I wish for your assistance at the interview, since you are the counselor of Mademoiselle Marie. I shall, perhaps, call up Master Jacques, and give an order for Léonie to be brought to us for a little while. I want to see with my own eyes if this grand passion for the child is sincere. Go to sleep. To-morrow, early, I will send an express to Vignollette, and perhaps to Champgousse."

The next day I wrote to Emilie and her brother. At noon I went to the tower with Henri and the little Léonie. We found Miette there with Mademoiselle de Nives. Jacques, who lived farther off, arrived last.

My first word was an act of authority. Charliette was on the threshold of the kitchen, but, perceiving me, quickly took refuge within. I had seen her, however, and, addressing Mademoiselle de Nives, demand-

ed if this woman was on the watch by her orders. Mademoiselle de Nives seemed surprised, and said she did not come with her.

"Then," I replied, "she comes on her own account, and I shall order her to go away."

I entered the kitchen without giving Marie time to get the start of me, and asked the distracted Charliette what she was doing in my house. She replied that she came to receive Mademoiselle Marie's orders.

"Mademoiselle Marie does not need you; go away. I forbid you from ever putting your foot in my house without my permission."

"Ah!" cried Charliette, in a dramatic tone, "I see that my dear young lady is ruined! You are all against her!"

"Go," I resumed; "the quicker the better!"

She went away furious, and I rejoined the ladies in the apartment refurnished by Henri. Mademoiselle de Nives wore her costume of a village-girl, which was marvelously becoming to her, I must confess. Léonie threw herself into her arms; they were inseparable. Emilie also caressed the child, and found her charming. I saw that at the last moment Marie had made a full confession. Henri appeared a little embarrassed in carrying out the part he had assumed. He heard opportunely the step of Jacques's pony, and went down to help him in putting it into the stable.

During this time, coming and going, and without having the appearance of wishing to enter upon the subject at present, I observed the features and attitude of Mademoiselle de Nives, and found her simple and sincere. This point gained, I examined my niece; she was changed, neither pale nor cast down, but serious, and as if armed for any combat with a high and magnanimous will.

Jacques entered, and met with a cordial welcome. He kissed respectfully the hand that Mademoiselle de Nives extended to him without the least embarrassment. He was much disconcerted by astonishment and uneasiness, and appeared to be nerving himself up for a crisis beyond his power to avert.

"Now," I said to Mademoiselle de Nives, "we are going to discuss matters that will be very tiresome to Mademoiselle Ninie. She may go and play in the yard, directly under our eyes."

"Yes," cried Léonie; "with Suzette!"

"By-and-by," I said. "I promise to let you see her again before she goes home."

"That is not true; you will not call me back."

"I give you my promise," said Mademoiselle de Nives. "You must be good, and obey M. Chantabel. He is master here, and every one is willing to do as he wishes."

Ninie submitted, but not without making Suzette

promise to sit near the window, where she could look at her every moment.

When we were seated, Miette began resolutely :

“Uncle,” she said, “you have consented to receive my friend, and I thank you for her and for myself. You have no need to question her in regard to the events that brought her under my roof, for you are perfectly well acquainted with them. She comes to ask your counsel upon her future course, and, as she knows what kind of a man you are, has for you the respect you merit, and the confidence that is your due ; she is resolved—so she promised me—to follow your advice implicitly.”

“I have but one question to address to Mademoiselle de Nives,” I replied ; “and my opinion of her cause will depend upon her answer. Why, on the eve of the time fixed for her certain and absolute liberty, did she think it her duty to quit the convent ?—Reply without fear, mademoiselle : I know you have much frankness and courage, and all the persons present are in your confidence ; it is important that I should be so also, and that we all deliberate upon what is most favorable to your interests.”

“It is difficult for me to make the public confession you demand,” replied Mademoiselle de Nives, who appeared much moved by the presence of Henri and Jacques ; “but I can make it, and I will make it.”

"We listen respectfully."

"Indeed, M. Chantabel, I had a reason that you will scarcely credit for escaping from the convent before the proper time. My ignorance of real life was so profound—and this is not my fault—that I believed I must show a determination to stand up for my legal rights before I came of age. I was persuaded that, if I allowed one day to pass beyond this term, I was bound by this act to remain in the convent for life."

"Were you told this enormous falsehood in the convent?"

"No; my nurse Charliette pretended to have asked legal advice in Clermont, and advised me to distrust the patience with which the nuns and confessors awaited my decision. 'They will not harass you,' she said; 'they will surprise you, and suddenly say to you, "The hour is passed—we hold you for your whole life."'"

"And you believed Charliette?"

"I believed Charliette, having only her in the whole world to be interested in me, and tell me what I thought to be the truth."

"But since you found out she was deceiving you?"

"Do not make me speak evil of this woman who rendered me great service—interested service, I know—but I availed myself of her aid, and am still receiv-

ing it. Let her go for what she is worth. She is perhaps unworthy of your attention."

"Pardon me: I must know if I am in the presence of a person counseled and directed by Charliette, or by the friends she has around her."

"I am ashamed that it is necessary for me to reply that the persons present, commencing with yourself, are everything to me, and Charliette nothing."

"That is very well so far, but I must insist upon other conditions before I undertake to save you from the dangers and difficulties into which this Charliette has thrown you. You must swear that you will not see her again, have any correspondence or any kind of connection with her, so long as you remain with my niece. You ought to understand that the presence of a woman of this character defiled the abode of Emilie Ormonde."

It was, I believe, the first time that Mademoiselle de Nives ever heard the plain truth. Frightened and menaced, on one side, by clerical thralldom; spoiled and flattered, on the other, by her nurse and the blind love of Jacques, she had never before heard the language of reproach. She blushed with confusion, which appeared to me a good omen, hesitated a moment for a reply, then, by a spontaneous movement, turned to Miette and said, casting herself on her knees and throwing her arms around her :

"Forgive me, I knew not what I was doing! Why did you not tell me?"

"I should have told you, if you had trusted me," replied Emilie, embracing and raising her. "Until this morning I did not know how guilty and contemptible this Charliette is."

"I will never see her again!" cried Mademoiselle de Nives.

"You swear it?" I said.

"I swear by my eternal salvation!"

"Swear upon your honor! Eternal salvation is never compromised as long as a moment for repentance remains. It is a beautiful idea to make God greater than the justice of men, but here we treat of facts purely human, and are occupied with matters that may be useful or injurious to our fellow-beings."

"I swear, then, upon my honor, never to see Charliette again, although, in truth, human honor, as usually understood, seems to me a frivolous thing."

"It is there the shoe pinches," I replied. "Will you permit me to make a little explanation that is very necessary?"

"I am listening," said Mademoiselle de Nives, sitting down again.

"Very well. When the expression 'human honor' has no clear meaning for the mind, it is best to withdraw from the social sphere and communion with man-

kind. One lives then in a sublime companionship with the divine Mind, and monastic rule imposing solitude and silence exempts one from all obligation to the human race. I know that you do not wish to choose this life; then, as maid or wife, consecrated to works of charity or to the occupations of this world, you must have a guide and master to teach you the obligations of life. You will do no good, entirely by yourself, outside of the cell, since you disdain to learn anything of practical life. You will need a spiritual director to utilize your charity or a husband to regulate the propriety of your conduct. You are nearly twenty-one years old; you are fascinating, and conscious of your power, since you make use of your fascinations to carry out your plans from day to day. From the moment when you began to exert an influence upon the mind of others, you have no longer the right to say, 'I do not know what I shall do—I will see!' You must see, and will at once; you must choose between a husband and a confessor, otherwise there is no means of dealing with you in earnest."

"What?" cried Mademoiselle de Nives, who started up, astounded at my rudeness; "what are you saying to me, M. Chantabel? What do you demand of me?"

"Nothing but the free exercise of your will."

"But precisely!—I do not know my will. I wait until God inspires me."

"Has God inspired you thus far? Did he command you to run away with Jacques Ormonde?"

"Uncle," cried Jacques, "you forced my secret from me; you had found it out before, and I thought it would be sacred with you, and all at once you torture me! Permit me to retire; I am stifling here, suffering martyrdom!"

"I do not blame you, Jacques," said Mademoiselle de Nives; "I intended to tell your uncle all that he knows already."

"So much the more," I resumed, "since you confided it to my son, with permission to reveal everything to me."

Jacques became pale, looking at Henri, who remained unmoved. Then he looked at Marie, who cast down her eyes in confusion, then raised them immediately, and said, with a *naïve* simplicity:

"It is true, Jacques, I told everything to your cousin, for I needed him to accomplish an enterprise in which you would have refused to aid me."

"You know nothing about it," replied Jacques. "My cousin certainly merits all your confidence, but I had given you a sufficient proof of my devotion to have a right to it also."

"You forget, Jacques," I said, "that when Mademoiselle de Nives needs any one, as she says herself, she comes to the point directly, without troubling her-

self about other people. She could, doubtless, have taken your arm to look at Léonie through the park-railing, or to accost Henri in your presence, or to make romantic visits to him in this tower, the unquestionable innocence of which you would prove from your own experience ; but all this would not have succeeded so well. Henri would have distrusted a person presented by you, and consequently compromised. He would have reasoned and discussed as I am now discussing. It was much more sure to surprise him, give him a mysterious rendezvous, confide herself to him like a sacred dove whose purity sanctifies all it touches, finally open her heart to him free from all attachment or consideration toward you. Experience has proved that Mademoiselle de Nives is not so much a stranger as one might think to the manner of action in real life, and that, if she ignores the suffering she causes, she divines and appreciates the manner of making use of it."

"Henri!" cried Mademoiselle de Nives, pale and with clinched teeth, "do you share in the cruel opinion your father has of me?"

Henri's face was for a moment contracted with an expression of anguish and pity ; then, suddenly gaining the ascendancy with the heroism of a good conscience, he replied :

"My father is severe, Mademoiselle Marie ; but on

the whole he says nothing that I did not say to you here last evening, while alone with you."

Mademoiselle de Nives then turned to Jacques, as if to demand from him aid and protection in her distress. She saw that he was weeping, and took a step toward him. Jacques took two, and, carried away by his good disposition as much as by his want of conventional manners, he threw his arms around her, and pressed her to his heart, saying :

"Indeed, all this is not my fault ! If you deserve blame in regard to me, I know nothing of it the moment you suffer. Will you have my blood, will you have my honor, will you have my life ? Everything is yours, and I ask nothing in exchange, as you know very well."

For the first time in his life, thanks to the rudeness of my attack, Jacques, struck to the heart, found real eloquence. The expression of the countenance, accent, gesture, everything was sincere, and consequently serious and strong. It was a revelation for us all, and especially for Mademoiselle de Nives, who had never before understood him. She was sensible of the injury she had done him, and read it in her own conscience. She started like a person seized with vertigo on the border of a precipice, and threw herself back ; but she instinctively drew near again to the heart whose manly beating against her own she had felt for

the first time, and from that resting-place addressed Emilie.

"You ought to make the severest reproaches to me," she said, "for I have been, it is plain, ungrateful to your brother, and a coquette with your cousin! As usual, you say nothing, and suffer without complaining. I promise solemnly to make amends for everything, and to be worthy of your friendship!"

"May God hear you, mademoiselle!" I said, holding out my hand to her. "Pardon me for having made you suffer. I think I have unraveled the truth from the labyrinth into which Charliette threw you. I feel sure that henceforth you will reflect and engage in no more adventures whose consequences can be turned against you. Now we will talk about business, and see how you can be reinstated in your rights without making a scandal or commotion. Let me tell you that I accepted your step-mother's confidence upon one condition, that of acting as a peace-maker. I am not interested in her personally; but she did a wise thing: she knows that I adore children; that in every case where these poor innocents are concerned I plead for their interest, and, whether I was willing or not, she trusted her daughter to me. There is poor Ninie, beautiful and good, and, as far as I can see, moderately happy. Her fate will be worse with a mother embittered by poverty."

"Say nothing more, M. Chantabel!" cried Mademoiselle de Nives. "Regulate yourself, without consulting me, the sacrifice that I ought to make, then give me a pen, and I will sign without reading. You know the amount of my fortune, and I know nothing about it. Arrange everything to make Ninie as rich as I am. I wanted to see you to tell you this."

The generous girl turned toward the window while speaking thus, as if to throw a kiss to her sister; but, not seeing her, she called and received no reply.

"Dear me!" she said, running to the door, "where can she be? I do not see her anywhere!"

At the same instant the door was thrown open impetuously, and Ninie rushed into Mademoiselle de Nives's arms, crying out in a voice strangled by fear:

"Hide me! hide me! Mamma! she is coming! she is running! she is here on the stairs! she will find me, and whip me! Don't let mamma have me! Hide me!"

And she rapidly thrust herself under a table, the thick covering of which reached to the floor.

XIII.

It was just in time. Madame de Nives, pale and excited, entered in her turn, absolutely as if she were

in her own house, without knocking or being announced. Marie had turned to the window, leaving visible only her black and white fichu, her blond hair coquettishly curled, and her straw hat turned up behind; without being dressed as a peasant, she wore as usual that pretty Auvergnat bonnet which blends with the new fashions in such a manner as to appear elegant without ceasing to be original.

"Pardon me, M. Chantabel," said Madame de Nives, who at first glance took, or pretended to take, the two young ladies for peasant-girls; "you are here in consultation; I did not know it. A thousand pardons! I am looking for my daughter; I thought she was here. They told me at your house that you had taken her in this direction. Tell me where she is, that I may embrace her. I will wait in your garden till you have leisure to attend to me in my turn."

While the countess was talking I had glanced to the back part of the tower, visible through a window opposite to the one occupied by Mademoiselle de Nives, and had seen Charliette watching and waiting in the ruined and abandoned part of the manor. Therefore, Madame de Nives appeared to me perfectly well informed of what was going on, and I was unwilling to indulge her in a useless pretense.

"You will not disturb me, madame," I said. "I am here with my family. If there is a consultation,

you will not be in the way." And, advancing to the easy-chair, I added: "Mademoiselle Ninie is in this room; but she is in the midst of the game of 'hide-and-seek,' and does not see you.—Come, Ninie," I continued, raising the table-cover, "it is your mamma; hasten to welcome her."

Ninie obeyed with a visible reluctance. Her mother seized rather than took her up, and seated her on her knee, saying, in a harsh tone:

"What! are you insane? Don't you remember me?"

While Ninie was embracing her mother with more fear than love, Mademoiselle de Nives, anxious to know if the child was a victim as she had been told, turned round to observe this glacial kiss. The clear, cold eyes of the countess were fixed upon hers, and I saw her tremble as at the sight of a viper. Doubtless she would not have recognized her step-daughter immediately and under this disguise if she had not been informed of her presence. She was evidently prepared for the interview, as she did not mistake her for an instant for Miette, and a ferocious smile contracted her lips.

"You pretend, sir," she said, in a loud and clear voice, "that I shall not be in the way in the consultation I have interrupted. As far as I can see, the question to be settled is a marriage between two young

ladies and two gentlemen. I am acquainted with but one of them ; which of the suitors is hers ? ”

“ Here he is ! ” replied Mademoiselle de Nives, without hesitation, pointing to my nephew. “ This is M. Jacques Ormonde. The bans will be published in a fortnight, and, although at that time your consent will be unnecessary, I hope, madame, you will deign to approve my choice, for the sake of propriety.”

“ It will be very necessary,” replied the countess, “ since this is the gentleman who, it appears, ran away with you.”

“ This gentleman,” added Jacques, to whom happiness gave self-control, “ would suggest to the countess that Mademoiselle Ninie is out of place here, and would be better off amusing herself in the yard.”

“ With Charliette, who is still prowling about there ? ” I said, raising my voice ; “ no, take the child to her nurse, who is waiting for her among the vines, and come back here yourself. If your future wife is obliged to make some concessions, we need your approval.”

“ She may make as many concessions as she pleases,” replied Jacques, taking Ninie by the hand, who followed him with an instinctive confidence ; “ she gave you full control of her affairs, and I do the same, uncle.” And he led away the child, followed by the glance of the countess, who thought

much less of her daughter than she did of examining the features and appearance of Jacques with a haughty and disdainful curiosity.

"Here is, then," she said, as soon as he had gone out, "the object of Mademoiselle de Nives's grand passion !"

"The young man is my nephew," I replied, "my dear sister's son, an excellent person, and a very worthy man."

"Or a very gallant man ? M. Chantabel, you are indulgent, as is well known, to the members of your family ! I see you find nothing worthy of condemnation in the elopement. It will not, however, be approved by every one."

"It will remain unknown, for no one here will divulge the secret, out of regard for Mademoiselle de Nives and you."

"For me ? indeed !"

I made a sign to the others to leave us, and, approaching very near her, said, in a whisper :

"For you, madame, who agreed with Charlette to bring about this scandal, and ruin Mademoiselle de Nives !"

She became pale, as if she were going to faint ; but, making a strong effort, she replied, in a low voice :

"This woman has told a frightful lie, and you will never be able to prove it !"

"Are you willing to let me call her? She is still there."

"Why do you want to call her!" she replied, with a wild look.

"You must summon her before us all to tell the truth. The recompense you promised her will be at this price; and, if necessary, we have a collection of documents that will unloose her tongue. She will produce your letters."

The countess feebly murmured these words:

"You must not do that! I am in your hands—spare me!"

Then she sank back in her chair in a real fainting-fit. I had guessed right, for I learned the details afterward. Charliette had, of course, fleeced, taken advantage of, deceived, and betrayed every one in turn.

My niece and Mademoiselle de Nives came eagerly to Madame de Nives's assistance. She recovered her senses very quickly, and wanted to renew the conversation. I begged her not to fatigue herself uselessly.

"We can," I said, "renew the conference later this evening or to-morrow."

"No, no," she said, "immediately, especially as I have nothing to say. I have simply to wait for propositions that one would think ought to have come from me on the eve of a general settlement of our interests."

"There are no propositions to be made," I replied. "You thought that Mademoiselle de Nives, having been led to commit acts of grave imprudence, would need silence and a generous pardon on your part. Things are changed now, as you have just seen. Silence is for the common interest, and pardon is no more only a matter of expediency—say, rather, of Christian charity. Mademoiselle de Nives is absolute mistress of a considerable fortune. I know now the amount of it, for I procured it during your absence. She has a right to demand the accounts of guardianship, which, as I had foreseen and calculated, will amount to about two hundred and forty thousand francs; but she does not want her sister to be brought up in constraint and privation. She will give you an unconditional receipt for all sums expended or saved by you during her minority. It is for you, madame, to address to her—I will not say thanks—but at least to give evidence of the satisfaction a mother ought to feel under such circumstances."

Madame de Nives had expected to make a better bargain by her unworthy plots. She was checkmated and overwhelmed. She tried to speak, but could not utter a word, and made to Mademoiselle Marie a kind of grimacing smile, with an abrupt inflection of the head. She recovered, however, strength enough to say that Léonie would still be very poor, since the possi-

bility of laying aside even a small sum in the large and expensive Château de Nives was an entirely gratuitous supposition on my part.

"I know nothing about it," replied Mademoiselle de Nives, rising. "M. Chantabel, would you be kind enough to tell me the amount of my income as nearly as you can?"

"If you sell the Nives estate, mademoiselle, you will have an income of fifty thousand francs. If you keep it, you will have thirty thousand."

"And now," she resumed, "will you ask Madame de Nives how large an income she requires to live in ease and security?"

"I shall never enjoy these two blessings again," said the countess; "I must have at least fifteen thousand francs a year to bring up my daughter, without letting her feel the change in her situation."

"This, with your small saving, of which I also know the amount, will give you the means of living in the same manner as you have done since your marriage. Mademoiselle de Nives must decide if your affection for her merits such a sacrifice."

"I will do it!" cried Marie, without a moment's hesitation; and, perceiving Jacques, who was just entering, she took his hand, adding: "We will make the sacrifice; but upon one condition, without which I shall adhere to the conditions that M. Chanta-

bel has drawn up—I must have an unconditional release.”

“What, then, is this condition?” said Madame de Nives, whose steel-colored eyes shone with a metallic lustre.

“You must give my sister to me, and resign all your rights over her to me. At this price you will be rich, live where you please—excepting at Nives, where I intend to establish myself. You will see Léonie; but she will be mine, mine alone!—Jacques, do you consent?”

“Joyfully!” he replied, without hesitation.

Madame de Nives did not appear thunderstruck, as she should have done in conformity to the character she was playing. The idea was not new to her. Marie had proposed it through Charliette, and the countess had had time to reflect upon it. She feigned, however, a new fainting-fit. Marie and Miette were very much excited.

“This is too cruel!” contended my niece; “this lady is ill, and cannot bear such emotion. She may be wicked—that is possible; but she cannot be indifferent to her daughter, and we are demanding too much of her!”

“Leave me alone with her,” I said; “and give yourself no trouble. Go to my house and wait for me, and, if Madame Chantabel has returned, tell her to

have a good dinner ready for us after all the excitement of the morning."

When they had gone, Madame de Nives kept me waiting a long time before she recovered possession of her faculties. She shed a few tears when resuming the subject, exclaiming that it was horrible, and that Mademoiselle de Nives took her revenge in an atrocious manner.

"Mademoiselle de Nives does not wish for revenge," I replied. "She possesses in reality a remarkable sweetness and gentleness. She has not addressed to you one bitter word under circumstances where the wrong you have done her would naturally turn her heart against you. She has taken a great fancy to Léonie, and I think the child returns it as far as she knows how."

"One thing is certain : my daughter loves every one excepting her mother ! She has a terrible disposition. She showed an aversion to me when she was very young."

"I know it, and it is a great misfortune ; but it is your own fault, for you have not taken the right course to make yourself loved by her and respected by your servants."

"You cannot, however, advise me to abandon her to an insane woman who has taken a passing fancy for her, and will soon cease to care for her ?"

"When she ceases to care for her, she will send her back to you ; but then you must bid farewell to your income of fifteen thousand francs ! Pray, then, in earnest, that the two sisters may live happily together !"

I saw plainly that Madame de Nives perceived the justice of the argument. She still discussed the question, however, for the sake of appearances.

"You really think, then," she resumed, "that Mademoiselle de Nives is capable of bringing up a young girl in a suitable manner ?"

"If you had asked this question yesterday, I should have said, 'No, I do not think so.' I did not then fully know her ; while to-day, here in your presence, I felt a great admiration for her. This childlike generosity has a sublime aspect that exalts it above the trifling mistakes of an over-excited imagination. I had just been finding great fault with her when you entered ; she punished me by showing an admirable repentance and sincerity. I am now entirely on her side, which will not prevent me from serving you in taking care that the payment of your income shall be made a serious and inviolable contract."

"Ah, yes ! that is of special importance !" cried the countess, involuntarily. "This allowance must not be a lure."

"Neither must it be an extortion," I replied ; "the

allowance will cease on the day when you reassert your claim to Léonie."

"That is understood," said the countess, in an angry tone; "but if Mademoiselle Marie, who knows nothing about money, should ruin herself! I must have a mortgage on the Nives estate."

"You shall have it; but do not fear that she will ruin herself: on the contrary, the moment she marries Jacques Ormonde she will be much richer."

"Will this famous Jacques Ormonde, who is called a conqueror of women, make his wife, and, consequently, my daughter, happy?"

"This conqueror of women has the best heart in the world, and a natural disposition of the finest water."

"And, while awaiting the marriage, what shall I do with my daughter, who thinks of nothing but running away from me, and to whose absence I must become gradually accustomed, in order to have courage to leave her entirely?"

"You will go to Nives to make preparations for your departure. Ninie will stay at my house with Mademoiselle Marie, who, being betrothed to Jacques, will remain under the protection of her future uncle."

"But your son—your son has just had—I know it very well—an intrigue with her!"

"That is one of Charliette's lies. My son is an

honest man and a serious-minded man. It is possible that Charliette wanted to make money out of him also ; but he is sharper than Jacques. Meanwhile, as we must not give occasion for gossip, my son will pass the rest of his vacation with his cousin at Champgousse, and will not return home until the marriage takes place. We shall sign this very day the deeds that concern you at the same time with the contract, and, while waiting, as you have recovered your self-possession, you will dine at our house with my family and yours."

"Impossible ! I cannot see all these people, Ninie especially ! This child, who leaves me with joy in her heart, is my punishment."

"It is a deserved punishment, Madame de Nives. You wished to debase, ruin, and dishonor your husband's daughter—you were determined either to make her a nun or to destroy her character forever ! It is too much ; you have wearied the patience of God. Do not abuse that of men ; and take every precaution to keep them in ignorance of the secret designs of your guilty soul. Offer your daughter as a recompense for your cruel deeds, and accept in return the worldly wealth for which you have worked with so much perseverance and so little scruple. You must dine with me, since you have told my wife everything you could think of against Mademoiselle Marie. I do not ask you to confess your guilt nor to retract your words ;

we shall say that you have had a reconciliation with your step-daughter, and that, through my efforts, an arrangement has been made satisfactory to all parties concerned."

XIV.

MADAME DE NIVES yielded, took my arm, and we went together toward my house. As we came out of the pine-wood I saw Charliette, who was watching us, very much disturbed on her own account at the result of our conference.

"We must make a settlement with this jade," I said to the countess.

"No, no!" she replied, in terror; "I never want to see her again."

"For that very reason she must be paid."

And, turning toward Charliette, I made her a sign to come to us.

She quickly obeyed the summons.

"The time for settling your accounts has arrived," I said; "we have all agreed to have nothing more to do with you. M. Jacques Ormonde has paid you three thousand francs—it is more than you deserve. He has no further need of you. Mademoiselle de Nives will also give you three thousand francs. How much has the Countess de Nives, who is here present, promised you?"

"Ten thousand," replied Charliette, boldly.

"Only five thousand," replied the countess, bristling with indignation.

"On the day when Mademoiselle de Nives comes of age," I rejoined, "you can come to my house to receive the sum of eight thousand francs, after which you will have nothing more to expect from any one."

"That is little for so much work," replied Charliette. "If I told all that I know—"

"You can tell it if it pleases you to be driven away in all quarters as a promoter of intrigue, and a vile woman. If you talk about us, we will talk about you also ; beware !"

Charliette, frightened by my words, went off as quickly as possible, and, during the ten minutes it took us to reach my house, I saw that Madame de Nives was rapidly recovering her self-composure. This woman, whose sole impelling power and sole passion was avarice, horrified me. I was none the less very polite, respectful, and attentive to her. I had told her some plain truths, and had gained a good cause. I had no angry feeling to excite me, and I was satisfied with myself. I conducted her to a room, as she wished to rest for a little while.

Madame Chantabel had not returned. Miette had courageously gone to work to prepare the dinner. She understood the art of cooking, was well acquaint-

ed with my tastes, and was much beloved by my servants. I saw with pleasure that we should have a good dinner, and that no dish would be a failure—my wife not being there to excite the nerves of the cook by giving confused directions.

It gave me still greater pleasure to see Henri smiling at Miette's side, and helping her in the most lively mood ; he had taken off his coat and put on a white apron. This was so contrary to his tastes and usual serious bearing, that I could not conceal my surprise.

"What do you wish ?" he said ; "there are dramatic and romantic heroines here who would be very much puzzled to know how to make a simple omelet. Emilie, who is in my eyes the only and true heroine of the day, and who makes no effort to attract attention, consecrates herself to our service as if she were good for nothing else. It is only just for me to save her all the trouble I can, or at least make her laugh by my awkwardness.

And, as Miette went away to look after her pastry—"See," he said, "how skillful and quick she is ! With her silk dress and trimmed fichu, she takes no precaution, and yet she will not soil them with a single spot. She is in her element—home, country, and domestic life."

"We must leave her there," I replied, with a ma-

licious purpose. "Such a condition is not poetic enough for a man of your time."

"I beg your pardon, father, I find it entirely sufficient ! Poetry is present everywhere, if one has the eye to see it. It was at Vignollette in the old times, when, in the very middle of her great, black kitchen, where the huge copper vessels shone so brightly, I looked at Miette as she kneaded in her pretty fingers the cakes for our breakfast. It was a picture of Rembrandt with a figure of Correggio in the centre. At that time I felt the charm of this intimate life and this model woman. I forgot everything, but now I see again the past through the revived medium. Miette is much more beautiful than she was in those days, and has become much more graceful. Besides, I am hungry ; the smell of the food seems to me delicious. The animal is in harmony with the poet in crying out : 'Here is the truth—a well-regulated and well-appointed existence, an adorable wife, an inexhaustible depth of confidence, mutual respect, and tenderness.'"

"You have come to a full comprehension of the heart as well as the reason. Will you not tell this to Emilie ?"

"No, I dare not ; I am not yet worthy of forgiveness. I know Miette has suffered for my fault : she believed for a day or two that I was in love with the

heiress, and that I was willing to compromise her reputation to get her away from Jacques. Without you, dear father—without the full explanations made to-day, she would, perhaps, still believe it. Do you know how you frightened me for a moment? But, when you put me under the necessity of telling Made-moiselle de Nives before you all what I ought to think, and what I really had thought, of her frivolity, I understood that you were rendering me a great service, and I regained at once my self-control and willingness to do as you desired. If Marie's odd ways surprised me for a little while, no one but myself must ever know it, and, if she felt any doubt in regard to the matter, I am glad you gave me the opportunity to remove the impression. She belongs to Jacques, certainly, and to no one else. She has a noble character, notwithstanding her childish triviality. Jacques has the great good sense that is wanting in her, and, since he loves her dearly, will impart it to her unconsciously, without wounding her pride. He will always talk like her; but he will do it in such a way that in her turn she will think like him."

"Very well reasoned, my son, and now may God grant us his aid! In these *dénouements* that pressing circumstances force us to improvise, life strongly resembles a pleasing romance. I own that, in pleading before you the cause of reason and right, I did not ex-

pect such a success—I did not see that two beautiful and good marriages would result from my simple and sincere words ! But where are our lovers ? ”

“ Over there, on that bench you see from here. I believe they are waiting impatiently for the countess’s decision in regard to Ninie. Do you think she will give her up ? ”

“ That point is already decided,” I replied, “ and I must hasten to tell them so.”

Miette at this moment came toward us with her pastry ready to put into the oven.

“ I am not in the habit of embracing my cooks,” I said, kissing her on the forehead ; “ but this one is so much to my taste that I cannot refrain.”

Jacques and Marie, seeing me coming from the pantry, ran to meet me with Ninie.

“ Well,” said Mademoiselle de Nives, pointing to the child, “ may I hope ? ”

“ She is yours ! ” I replied, in a low tone. “ Do not say a word, and endeavor to avoid additional trouble by inducing her to bid farewell to her mother properly.”

“ That is easy,” said Jacques ; and, taking Ninie in his arms : “ Listen, mademoiselle ; your mamma, seeing that you are very well here, and very fond of us, consents to leave you a few days longer with Suzette at Papa Bébel’s. You will certainly thank her

for her kindness? You will embrace her, and be very good, will you not?"

"Yes, yes!" cried the child, beside herself with joy; "I will be very good. What happiness!—We shall go after dinner to the fountain with Suzette and my hobby-horse, Henri."

"It is I who will be the hobby-horse," replied Jacques, smiling, "and Suzette will make the boats."

"Have you pardoned me," I said to Mademoiselle de Nives, "and will you consent to remain with me until your marriage?"

Marie took my hands with that charming outpouring of the heart that atoned for every fault, and, in spite of my resistance, pressed her lips to them.

"You have saved me," she said; "you are and you will be my father! I need so much to be directed, to be really loved! You must make me worthy of this dear Jacques, who spoils me, and from whom I cannot draw the slightest reproach."

"Then I shall scold at you, and it will be his fault. He will tell you that you are perfection."

"Yes, indeed," exclaimed Jacques, "I shall tell her so!"

"And that I am an old dotard."

"As to that, no," he replied, half stifling me as he pressed me to his breast; "you will always be our guardian angel."

Meantime my wife arrived, and her arms dropped with surprise when she saw me embracing the lovers. He eyes were not large enough to examine the countenance and costume of Mademoiselle de Nives.

"Madame Chantabel," I said, while presenting her, "be kind enough, I beg you, to bless and embrace your future niece, a peasant-girl, as you see, but very well born, and worthy of your affectionate interest."

"Is this a joke?" said my wife; "would Jacques marry in this way, and at once, a person with whom we are not acquainted?"

"A few words will make you acquainted with me," said Mademoiselle de Nives. "I came to Percemont in disguise to consult M. Chantabel. He has expressed his approval of my marriage with Jacques Ormonde. My step-mother arrived unexpectedly. M. Chantabel brought about a reconciliation between us, and she even consented to share with me an inestimable treasure—the child whom you see playing yonder, whom you love also, and who will become mine."

"The child! your step-mother! I do not understand you at all," said my wife, astounded. "Is it a wager to mystify me?"

"Look," I said, "at that beautiful lady who is adjusting her toilet, and passing and repassing before the window of chamber number two in your house."

"The Countess de Nives! Is she here?"

"And Mademoiselle Marie de Nives also."

"And the countess gives her daughter—she gives Ninie to—"

"To the person of whom she has spoken so unkindly, and who does not deserve it. Did I not tell you that the countess was very odd?"

"I find the word too mild now, but I suppose there is money in all this?"

"Much money, for Mademoiselle de Nives does not count the cost when her heart speaks, and her act is still more worthy of commendation since she had nothing to fear from the calumny that menaced her. Emilie, Jacques, Henri, and I, in front of all, are here to defend and exonerate her."

"And you still receive this countess? Has she taken possession of our house?"

"For this evening. She has been very much agitated, and we are taking care of her. She is going to dine with us."

"To dine with us, indeed! And I not at home! An ignorant cook, and without brains!"

"Therefore I have found another, a wonder whom I wish to present to you. Will you not welcome your future niece?"

Marie approached gracefully and confidently. Madame Chantabel was much moved, and, when after the presentation Mademoiselle de Nives took her hand

to kiss in token of respect, my wife had tears in her eyes ; she was conquered.

"This does not prevent me from thinking," she said, as we were on our way to the kitchen, "that Jacques's marriage is remarkable, and far above his condition. Since you understand so well how to perform miracles, M. Chantabel, why did you not think of your own son before any one else ? Henri would have been a much more suitable and agreeable husband for this young lady in all respects than the great Jacques."

"My dear wife," I replied. "listen to me. Leave the cooking to take care of itself—everything is going on as well as you can desire ; let us talk a little while under these trees, like two old friends who ought to have but one heart and one will."

I related to my wife all that had passed, and added : "You see plainly that Mademoiselle de Nives, waited for and hoped for with good reason by Jacques, cannot be the wife of any one else, unless it were of an ambitious person, entirely without scruple."

"You are right, M. Chantabel, I do not deny it ; only I regret—"

"There is nothing to regret. Henri will be happy in his marriage, happier than any one in the world !"

"I see what you are driving at, M. Chantabel! You wish him to marry your *Miette Ormonde*!"

"He wishes it also ; he loves her."

"It is you who persuaded him to make this choice."

"No, I was very careful not to use any influence in the matter ; it would have been the means of estranging him from her, and I am not so foolish. What have you, then, against my poor *Miette* ?"

"Against her ? Nothing, to be sure—I do justice to her merits ; but it is—it is that bonnet."

"That village bonnet ? *Mademoiselle de Nives* has one on to-day just like it, and looks none the less like a countess."

"Yes, but she is one in reality—that is easily seen."

"And you think that *Miette* looks like an ungainly woman ?"

"No, she resembles her mother, who resembled you. There is nothing common in our family ; but *Miette* is cold, she does not love *Henri*."

"Ah, there is your mistake ! *Miette* appears cold to you because she is dignified and spirited. I thought you would understand her, for I remember some one whom I loved and sought in marriage—a long time ago. This person was jealous of a little blonde, without the least occasion, whom I asked to dance with me

at a country ball. My *fiancée* wept, though I knew nothing about it, and never confessed her resentment until after our marriage."

"This person was myself," replied my wife; "and I own I would have cut myself to pieces rather than confess that I was jealous."

"Why so, tell me?"

"Because—because jealousy is a feeling that leads us to doubt the man we love. If we were sure that he was deceiving us, we should cease to care for him; but we are not sure; we are afraid of offending him and of lowering ourselves in his estimation by the avowal of our distrust."

"Very well explained, wife. And, then, one suffers all the more from the effort to conceal it?"

"One suffers much, and must exercise great fortitude! Do you think that Miette has this fortitude?"

"And this endurance? All the more since her pride has been wounded by some one."

"By whom?"

"That is the very thing I want to know."

"Is it perhaps by me?"

"That is impossible."

"Well, it is the truth. I spoke sharply to this child, because she seemed to think Henri would stay in Paris. I confess I was afraid of it also, and was

out of temper about it. I vented my spite on poor Emilie, and don't know what I said to her. She went away in consternation, and, as I have not seen her since, I supposed she was in the sulks; but I assure you I bear her no ill-will, and love her as much as ever."

"Shall I tell her so?"

"At once. You say she is here; where is she hiding?"

"In the kitchen, with Henri."

"Henri in the kitchen? This is, indeed, something new! He, so aristocratic!"

"He declares that nothing is so distinguished as a young and beautiful girl engaged in the duties of housekeeping, and nothing so deserving of respect as the mother of a family like you taking care of the well-being of the household."

"This means that I ought to go and see to the dinner?"

"It means that Emilie has it in charge already, and that Henri looks upon her when he says the woman he loves will be a person useful, serious, devoted, and charming, like his mother."

"M. Chantabel, you have a golden tongue! The serpent had a voice like yours in paradise. You do with me whatever you please, and pretend all the time that I am the mistress."

"Yes, you are the mistress ; for, if you are unwilling to receive Miette, Henri and I must give her up."

Just at this moment Henri came to announce that dinner was ready, and, reading from the expression of my eyes the favorable condition of affairs, he embraced his mother, and said :

"Mother, I have a secret to tell you after dinner."

"Tell it immediately," she replied, much excited. "Dinner will wait. I want to know everything!"

"Very well. Only two words are required, my dear mother. I love Emilie—I have always loved her ; but I do not wish to tell her so without your permission."

My dear, good wife did not reply, but ran to the kitchen. She found Miette in the pantry, washing and wiping her pretty hands. She took her by the shoulders, then by the neck, and embraced her maternally several times. Miette returned the caresses with her eyes full of tears and a charming smile upon her lips.

"There is no need of any other explanation," I said ; "this is the best of all."

Henri thanked and embraced his mother also, and then we went to take our places at the dinner-table.

The dinner was so good that, notwithstanding the great constraint of the first moment, we could not resist the animal (if you will) but profoundly cordial understanding of persons who hold social communion together after the fatigue of a struggle and the relief of a reconciliation. I do not like to eat much or for a long time, but I like a table elegantly supplied with choice viands. Our thoughts, our faculties, our intellectual and moral disposition, depend much upon the delicacy or the grossness of the food we have assimilated. My wife, a much smaller eater than I, was almost a gormand on this occasion, with the intention—very evident to me—of complimenting Emilie, and repeating to her that she bowed down in her presence.

As I like to study character, and every action has a significance in my mind, I remarked that Mademoiselle de Nives ate nothing but creams, fruits, and bonbons, while Madame Alix de Nives, with her extreme thinness and pock-marked complexion, had the robust appetite of avaricious persons who dine at other people's expense. The great Jacques swallowed everything cheerfully, with a sincere and hearty flow of spirits; but this angular person, with her closed mouth and handsome, straight nose, too flat underneath, appeared to be carefully storing a supply of provisions in her stomach, as certain animals do in their nests at

the approach of winter. Vice is an ugly thing, and the description of it is disagreeable, since it is impossible to refrain from seeing its serious side; but, when one has escaped from its snares, he may be permitted to perceive its ludicrous aspect, and amuse himself inwardly as I did in replenishing the plate of the countess, seated at my right hand, and treated by us all with every appearance of the most devoted hospitality. Ninie's chair had been placed next to her. She went through with the affectation of sending her to sit by Mademoiselle de Nives.

"By the side of Suzette!" exclaimed the child.
"Ah, mamma, how kind you are!"

"It is the first affectionate word she ever addressed to me in her life," said Madame Alix, in a low voice.

"It will not be the last," I replied. "She was trusted to your servants too much, and learned suspicion and rebellion from their evil example. Now she will be brought up in the right way by generous souls, and will learn to respect you."

Very much at ease in regard to future proceedings, we put Madame de Nives into her carriage at dusk, and Marie placed the child in her arms for the last time, promising to see her again in a fortnight.

Madame Alix pretended to be much affected at parting with her child, and made the movements of a

person whose sobs prevent utterance ; then turning to me while giving back Ninie—"Remember," she said, "I must have a mortgage."

As the carriage departed I indulged in an immoderate outburst of laughter, which amazed Mictte and my wife, the one as simple-hearted as the other, and all disposed to be sympathetic.

"Indeed, M. Chantabel, your heart is too hard !" cried Bébelles ; for, following Mademoiselle Ninie's example, we all called my wife by this nickname.

"Oh, you wise woman !" I replied, "you are pitying the vulture that digests comfortably the fortune that has been given her with the dinner that has been served for her !"

When I had talked freely with my dear family, Jacques Ormonde raised an objection to one part of my plan.

"I ask nothing better," he said, "than to return to Champgousse, where I am thoroughly domesticated ; but I confess that I am no longer so eager to build a house there for my own use since Mademoiselle Marie prefers to live in her château, and I have no reason for regretting my small farm. The country is not lively, and my dog-hole is too contracted for me alone. I think that, even for a fortnight, Henri, whom you condemn to this exile, will be very uncomfortable. I propose an amendment : if two beds can be carried to the

tower of Perceмонт, we shall be pleasantly located there, and nearer you, while the proprieties will be equally well observed."

"No, that is too near," I replied. "We all need a short season of reflective and philosophical retirement before being reunited in the intoxication of happiness; but I will soften the sentence, for I find Champgousse too far off, and I would like to have you both where I can conveniently discuss with you questions of importance in regard to future arrangements. Henri admires Vignollette, which is within a stone's-throw, and we need Emilie at our house for all kinds of preparations. She must stay here, and you will reside at your sister's with my son."

This conclusion was adopted, and we found it very convenient to dine together every Sunday either at Vignollette or at my home.

I plainly foresaw that Jacques's marriage could not take place under six weeks. We needed that time to regulate the settlement of Ninie's fortune, and the conditions on which it was to be held. And then I did not wish to hurry this marriage which had been brought about so unexpectedly. I knew, indeed, that Mademoiselle de Nives would have no reason to repent of her choice, but for all that she needed time for reflection, and I wished to devote all the time possible to her intellectual and moral education.

The dear child made the task easy for me. I discussed with her the delicate questions concerning love, marriage, and monastic celibacy. I discovered in her some regret for that renunciation that had always been held up to her as a condition of grandeur and purity, and had to destroy many false ideas regarding the world and domestic life. She could not have, and did not have, any systematic defense ; she was, fortunately, very ignorant. I had nothing to combat but an exaltation of feeling ; but I made her understand that the most important employment of our powers and resources is to bring up a family and to give to humanity members worthy the name of men. I initiated her into a respect for that sacred law which she had been educated to regard as the worst thing possible for the true purpose and attainments of the soul. She listened to me with surprise, but also with earnest interest, and, very sensible to the good influence of intelligible and friendly words, declared that no teacher had ever moved and delighted her as I did.

The excellent Emilie, on her side, gave her the necessary instruction. She had already undertaken at Vignolette to interest her in a judicious course of reading ; but, preoccupied or over-excited, the pupil had fatigued the mistress to no purpose. Now she was attentive and docile. Intelligence was not wanting, and I must say that Miette with her serene sim-

plicity was an admirable teacher. Miette liked to do well everything she undertook. At the convent, which she entered as a peasant, she came out knowing everything better than her companions, and she had continued her studies since her return to her own home. She had always consulted me in the choice of books, and, when she had read them, came to discuss them with me, to present her objections, and to ask me to solve them. I saw then that she had read, and read well, and admired the peaceful harmony that reigned in her brain, which still retained its freshness and healthy action in spite of the constant exercise of the will and the rigid performance of moral obligations. I understood perfectly the worth of the woman I wished to bestow upon my son ; and Mademoiselle de Nives, who until the present time had known only the patience and kindness of heart, now comprehended the superiority of her companion. At the end of a month she knew enough to have no longer the resource of saying she was too ignorant to be judicious.

XV.

WHEN Marie was twenty-one years old, that is about a fortnight after she took up her abode with me, when all her affairs were settled, signed, authenticated,

and terminated, and when Madame Alix, satisfied and delighted, had taken flight for Monaco, where she wished to pass the winter, Jacques Ormonde came with Henri to take possession of the tower of Perce-mont. The weather was still fine, the chimneys did not smoke, and we saw each other every day. Made-moiselle Ninie went to make boats with her sister as often as she wished, and Bébelles had the table well served all the time without giving herself any trouble, and without having dramatic scenes with the cook. Miette, after finishing her duty as teacher, hastened to pluck a partridge or make butter. Nothing was ever behindhand for a moment, even when my wife, who had a restless nature, anticipated the time fixed by herself for such or such a piece of work. Besides, Miette preserved without effort the blind submission of fact, which is the *sine qua non* toward a provincial mother-in-law, who thenceforth, finding herself satisfied in her legitimate pride as a housewife, gave the absolute government of the household into her hands, and avowed that repose was occasionally very pleasant.

Jacques Ormonde, during this time, was receiving great benefit from Henri's influence. Their *tête-à-tête* at Vignollette had been employed in mutual comprehension and mutual appreciation of each other.

"We did not think of running about or of hunt-

ing," said Jacques. "Would you believe that we shut ourselves up at Vignollette like two hermits, and that the only exercise we took was to walk in the vineyards or the garden while we talked together from morning till evening? How much we had to say! Truly we were little acquainted with each other before. Henri confessed to me that he thought I was all stomach. I confessed to him that I thought he was all brain. We discovered that we had, above all, hearts that understood each other perfectly. Emilie will find her cellar in as good order as when she gave us the keys. We drank nothing but the water of Anval. We felt from the beginning that we needed no stimulants, and that we had been sufficiently excited by the stirring emotions our souls had experienced."

"This is the reason you look refreshed, and like one rejuvenated. Continue this regimen, my dear boy, and in a few weeks you will become again the handsome Jaquet."

"Never fear, uncle; I see now how it happens that, after having been the favorite of so many women who were good judges, I ran aground against a little schoolgirl who, without your aid, never would have loved me. The point in question now is, to recover the power of pleasing. I have no desire to make myself a laughing-stock the first time I kiss my intended wife."

"Add one thing more," said Henri; "that you made sober reflections upon the duties of life, such as you never took time to make before! We made mutual confessions; one was no better than the other. But we touched upon each other's faults more lightly. You were too lenient, I was too severe; we mean, however, to walk henceforth in the path of truth, and, if our life is not beautiful and good, I hope it will not be our fault any longer."

Jacques left us to join Marie and Ninie—who, fortunately for our purpose, clung to her sister like a shadow—in gathering the fresh bouquet that every day adorned our family table. The frost was not yet severe. There were still in the garden splendid chinas, model tea-roses, mignonette and heliotrope, in abundance, and many varieties of mallows, whose beautiful, curled leaf enlivens and embellishes the pyramids of fruit at dessert.

"Come, now," I said to Henri, "what are you going to tell me of yourself? You have said nothing to Miette, I know—"

"And I shall say nothing to her," he replied. "I cannot think of the proper words, my heart is too full. I found again at Vignollette all the sweetness of my first intoxication; every leaf, every blade of grass, was a page of my life, and brought back to me a pure and burning image of the past. Emilie's abode is a sanct-

uary for me. Would you believe that I did not allow myself to look into her chamber, even from the outside, though the casements were often left open? I was contented with examining the embroidery on her furniture; every stitch patiently shaded and brought into line was a reproach to the hours I had lost or employed unworthily when far away from her. What a frightful contrast there is between the life of a pure girl and a gay young man, even among the least depraved of his class! Emilie is twenty-two years old; she has passed three or four years in waiting to see if my will and pleasure would bring me back to her, the most trying years, perhaps, in a woman's life! She has risen above the endurance of solitude, or has accepted it; a glance at the velvet-down of her cheeks, at the purity of her smooth eyelids and rosy lips, gives abundant proof that an immodest idea, or simply a bold one, has never thrown its shadow over this flower, this precious diamond. Jacques, in his hours of unreserved confidence, confessed his many indiscretions, and I did not laugh, for I remembered my own shortcomings. If I have become reconciled with myself on account of my good resolutions, I cannot yet get rid of a feeling of shame in Emilie's presence. Here we are reunited at last, living under each other's eyes. Every moment when I can approach her without being intrusive, I seek her smile, offer my assistance, or talk

with her of old times, that is, of our old and happy love! I see plainly she has not forgotten the enjoyment of the past; she is pleased with my good memory, and smiles or sighs at the remembrance of our childish joys and sorrows. She understands, certainly, that I am not ardently reviving all this past to bury it in barren regret; but when I am ready to put into the present the word *happiness*, I perceive the necessity of commencing with that of *forgiveness*, and feeling that years of reparation can alone give me this right. I cannot say a single word. When, then, alas! shall I see the day draw near, in which I can say, 'Be my wife?'"

Emilie was passing us with a basket of ripe grapes gracefully poised upon her head. If she had been a coquette, she could not have chosen a richer or more becoming coiffure. The delicate vine-branches, with their varied shades of vivid color, fell back over her dark hair, and the grapes, brilliant as garnets, formed a diadem on her beautiful brow, as pure and proud as that of a chaste nymph.

"Miette," said Henri, who had hurried toward her, "will you be wholly the daughter of your uncle, who loves you so much, and the wife of your cousin, who adores you?"

"If you think I deserve the happiness of being

yours forever," replied Miette, putting her arms around my neck, "take me—I belong to you."

The two marriages took place on the same day, and the two weddings made but one at the Maison-Blanche; then Henri and his wife went to pass a few days in their beloved solitude of Vignollette. Marie and her husband went away with Ninie to commence house-keeping in the fine old Château de Nives, which they were obliged to refurnish, for Madame Alix had naturally carried everything away, even to the tongs. Jacques appreciated the value of money, but he had the good sense to sympathize in his wife's disinterestedness, and, instead of being indignant, his feelings found expression in loud bursts of laughter, so that the avaricious despoliation of their home was for several days a source of much mirth.

Besides, everything was not lost. One evening Marie said to Jacques: "Take a pick-axe and shovel and we will explore the park. I intend, if my memory does not fail me, to give you the pleasure of digging up a treasure."

She searched a few minutes among the brakes which covered a remote portion of the park, and suddenly exclaimed: "This must be the place; here is the old box-wood tree; this is the place; go to work!"

Jacques turned up the ground as she directed, and found an iron-bound casket, containing the diamonds of the late Countess de Nives. Some days before her death, foreseeing the ambition or distrusting the rapacious instincts of her successor, she had confided her secret to an old gardener, and had made him conceal her family jewels in this spot, directing him to inform her daughter of the hidden treasure at a proper time. The gardener died a little while after; but his aged wife had shown the place to Marie, who had not forgotten it: these diamonds were doubly precious as imperishable *souvenirs* of her mother.

However, the newly-married pair were somewhat straitened in pecuniary affairs during the first year of their marriage, but they scarcely perceived it. They were happy; they loved Ninie dearly: she repaid their devotion, and, though until this time small and delicate, she soon took on the plumpness of a skylark in full corn and the splendor of a rose in full sunshine.

At the return of the fine season, I determined to celebrate St. John's day with my family; it was my wife's birthday, for the true name of Bébelle was Jeanne.

As all the young people were going to pass the day with us, I arranged a pleasant surprise, by giving them an elegant breakfast at the tower of Perceмонт.

Henri had not welcomed the idea of shutting himself up permanently on this rock, for its isolation would interfere with our frequent intercourse ; but, as it was one of the favorite goals for our walks, I had several rooms cleared up and furnished, particularly an elegant dining-room, where the table was set on a carpet imitating rose-leaves of different colors. This tower of Percemont was still a source of pleasure to my wife, who liked to say to her friends, with a consequential air : " We do not live in it, we prefer our own house ; these things are only superfluities." As for myself, I pardoned the old donjon the slight vexations it caused me. I had obtained there the greatest success of my life—a success gained by persuasion. It had decided the happiness of my children, as well as that of poor little Léonie, who deserved to be loved—the sacred right of children.

All my dear guests met there once more in the enjoyment of a happiness that was touching to behold. Some letters were brought to me at dessert. The first one I opened was a letter announcing the marriage of the Countess Alix de Nives with M. Stuarton, an Englishman, humpbacked and rickety, but worth millions. I had met him in Paris when I was a young man, and he had then reached maturity. Our inconsolable widow had undertaken to take care of him, with the hope of inheriting his fortune in a short time.

“Ah!” cried Madame Ormonde, in consternation, “she is richer than I am; she will take Ninie away from me!”

“Do not be uneasy,” I said; “that which is good to take is good to keep. Madame Alix will soon be a widow, and Ninie would be a restraint upon her in marrying for the third time.”

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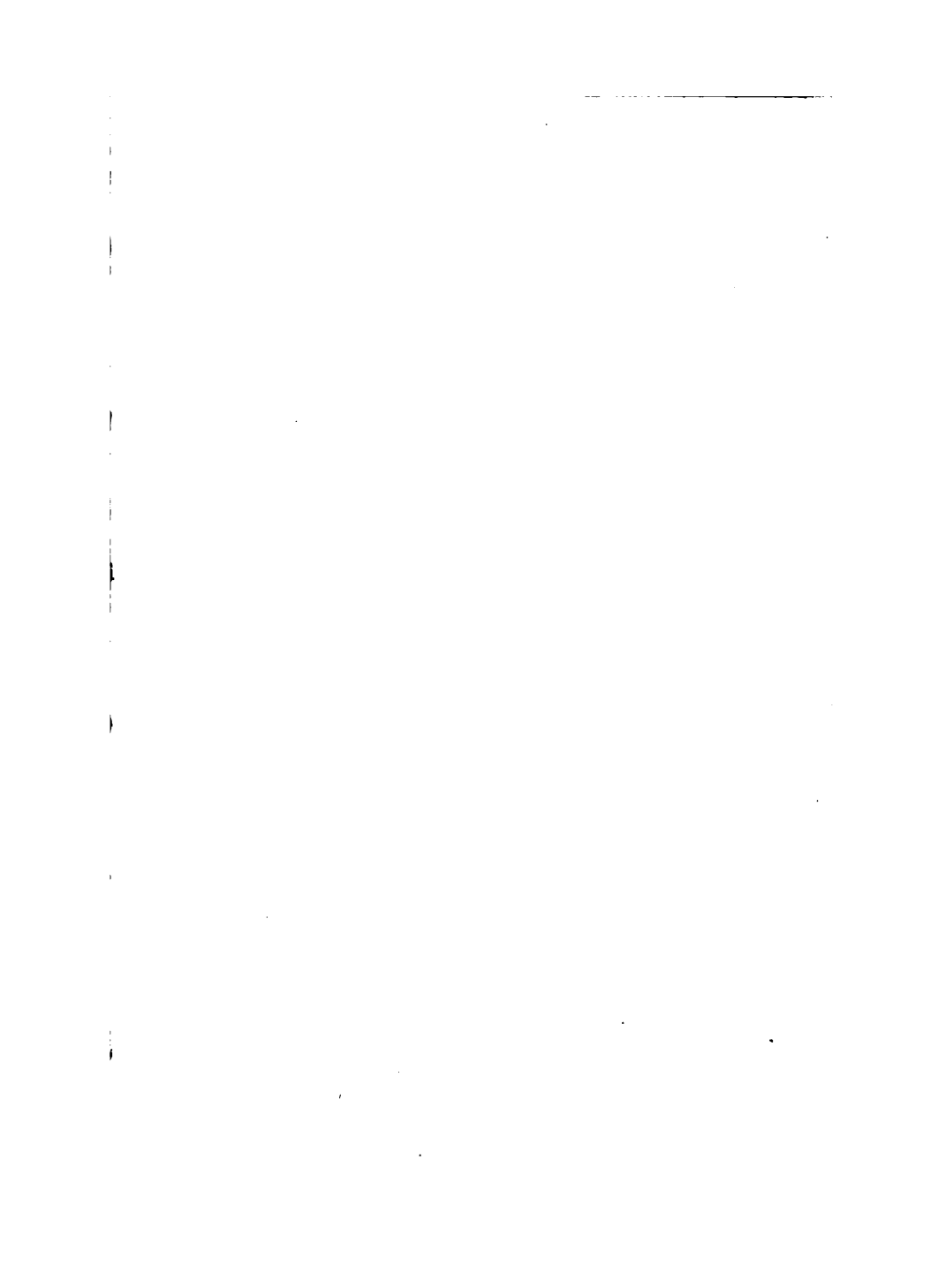
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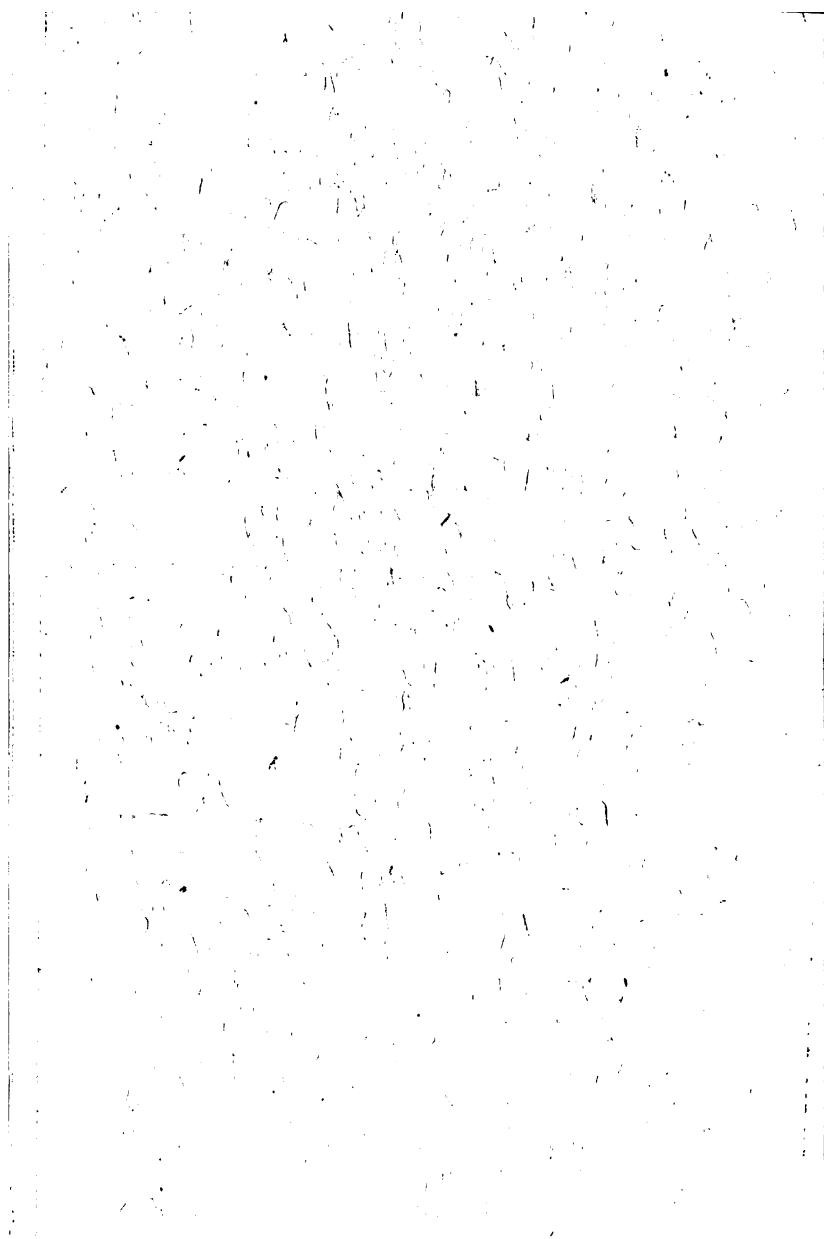
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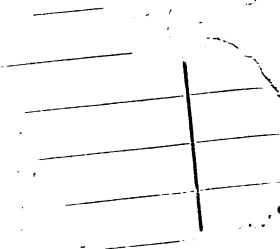
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